THE BLYTHE GIRLS: THREE ON A VACATION

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INTO HIS SYMPATHETIC EAR THEY POURED THE TALE OF THEIR WOES.

Blythe Girls: Three on a Vacation. *Frontispiece*—(*Page* 119)

THE BLYTHE GIRLS

Three on a Vacation

OR

The Mystery at Peach Farm

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE BLYTHE GIRLS: HELEN, MARGY AND ROSE," "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AROUND THE CAMPFIRE," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS AT THE COUNTY FAIR," ETC.

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By LAURA LEE HOPE

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The Blythe Girls: Three on a Vacation

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The Blythe Girls: Three on a Vacation

CHAPTER I

Great Plans

"I CAN'T wait to get away!"

Pretty, curly-haired Rose Blythe stretched her arms luxuriously above her head and settled deeper in the comfortable chair.

"Will be nice," murmured Margy Blythe, the "in-between one" of the three Blythe girls. "Two whole long delicious weeks with not a thing in the world to do but enjoy ourselves."

"Did you say *long* weeks?" asked the ash-blond girl, busy near the window adding the finishing touches to her latest picture. "I imagine those two weeks will seem mighty short, once we start on them."

"Listen to the joy-destroyer!" said Rose reproachfully. She wandered over to Helen and stood behind the older girl's chair. Head at a

critical angle, she examined her sister's new painting.

"Pretty good, Nell, and the last snow scene you will do for some time," she said, with a teasing tweak at her sister's ear.

Helen carefully finished daubing a spot of color where it belonged. Then she looked up at her youngest sister and smiled ruefully.

"I had to do some of this from memory," she confessed. "Not very easy either, with the balmy spring breezes giving way to summer heat."

"Poetic, but true, too true," murmured Margy, fanning herself with her handkerchief. "Can't we open another window, Posie?"

"If you see one, I'll be glad to," giggled Rose.

Margy lazily threw a cushion at her. The missile, landing beside Rose on the couch, was promptly captured by that young lady and placed beneath her curly head.

"Thanks!" she murmured. "Now I may sleep in peace!"

"You can, can you? Well, I shouldn't be so sure of that!" retorted Margy, and chuckled.

For at that moment a resounding chord sounded, played on a piano much out of tune. The off-key tootings of a cornet and the rau-

cous tuning of a violin accompanied the pianistic outrage.

Rose sat up resignedly and placed the cushion behind her back.

"The Jameson's again," she sighed. "I live in the hope that some day they will get what's coming to them."

" 'Tisn't possible," returned Margy gloomily. "Not so long as the law frowns on cruel and unusual punishment!"

The "musical Jamesons" or the "jazz family," as they were sometimes termed by their tolerant but long-suffering neighbors, consisted of four lighthearted youngsters, each one of whom boasted proficiency on some musical instrument. That the proficiency was an idle boast could be and was attested to by these same tolerant and long-suffering neighbors.

Now Margy put her hands over her ears and laid her head despairingly upon the table. Helen sighed and gave up the attempt to work.

"Anyway, that jazz sounds good," said Rose, her pretty foot keeping time on the worn rug. "Come on, Nell, let's do a turn."

She pulled her sister from her chair, to the imminent peril of the new canvas, and swung her into an improvised and fantastic dance that started Margy to chuckling and ended in gales of laughter from them all.

"Joe would love that," gasped the younger girl, out of breath but bright-eyed. "I'll have to try it on him to-night when he comes around."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," retorted Margy. "He'd think you were crazy."

"Joe stopped guessing about that long ago," said Rose, with an impudent wrinkling of her nose. She sat down at the table and assumed a business-like air.

"We really must decide where we are going for our vacation," she told the two older girls, with a slight frown of concentration. "Here we have all our clothes bought—or almost—and the new trunk ordered, and we haven't the slightest idea where we go from here."

"Isn't it the truth!" drawled Margy. "But I have to remind you, my dear young sister, that that painful state of affairs arises from no fault of mine. I have entreated you constantly for the last two weeks to treat this subject with the respect that is its due. And what was the result? Again, I ask you? What was the result?"

She pointed an accusing finger at Rose, who turned to Helen with a look of awed admiration.

"Ain't she grand? Ain't her langwidge simply scrumptious?" she drawled.

Margy sighed resignedly.

"You're an absurd infant," she declared. "After this I shall direct my conversation toward the only person in this room possessing ordinary common sense—"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I guess it's all right," Rose interrupted imperturbably. She reached for a pile of pamphlets advertising the desirability of various summer resorts. She chose one of these and flipped its pages idly. "I suppose we are taking a chance of being disappointed, no matter where we go. They all sound wonderful, if you let them tell it."

"There were two places that sort of caught my imagination," said Margy. She pulled the pile of summer propaganda toward her and drew two pamphlets from the lot.

"Look here, Helen," she said, and invitingly pulled a chair close to her own. "Doesn't that name, 'Crag House' sound good to you?"

"Better than that," agreed Helen, her eyes half closed in a dreamy way characteristic of her. "Suggests all sorts of romantic possibilities—"

"And wild and rugged crags to paint," teased Rose, pulling up her own chair.

"Then here's another," said Margy. "Perhaps it's because I'm particularly fond of the fruit that I like the name of it. Peach Farm! Isn't that luscious?"

"Um-yum—luscious!" agreed Rose. "As far as I'm concerned, we need look no further."

After considerable spirited discussion of this very important subject, and further study of the various folders, the choice had narrowed to Crag House and Peach Farm.

"Better write to both these places," Helen suggested. "When they have quoted terms to us, we shall be much better able to decide."

"Probably end by taking the cheaper place," said Rose, with the practical philosophy of young work-a-day America.

For it is characteristic of this impressive army of young workers, daily pouring into the cities and business centers from all parts of our vast country, that they are not only able to practice economy, but to like it as well.

So with the three Blythe girls. Forced by circumstances to earn their own living, they turned the necessity into a game, a game so thrilling and absorbing that small annoyances and economies paled into insignificance beside it. It was all just fun, a glorious adventure.

"You do the writing," said Rose to Margy. "Only don't use too elegant language. They might not understand what you were trying to say."

Margy deigned no reply to this impertinence, but went, instead, in search of pen and ink.

While she was gone the bell in the kitchen rang with unusually brazen emphasis. Running to the window, Rose saw that a Lossar-Martin delivery truck stood in front of the house.

"It's our trunk," she squealed delightedly. "Good gracious! I hope the men don't break their necks getting it up here."

Helen and Margy were behind her as she opened the door and leaned over the banister in the hall.

There was a great deal of bumping and fervent, though—luckily—unintelligible, muttering from the two rather lanky and undersized men who bore the trunk upward.

The girls scuttled into the living room as the cause of the muttering and thumping came in sight. It was Rose who indicated the exact spot in the middle of the living room where the trunk was to repose.

The two men were tipped and retired, still slightly disgruntled at the weight of the merchandise and the distance of the Blythe apartment—three flights—from the ground.

Rose threw herself with enthusiasm upon the shiny new acquisition.

"Oh, it's locked!" she exclaimed, disappointed that the lid did not at once yield to her touch. "Here's the key, but I suppose it will take three strong men to get it loose."

"I'm not a strong man, but you'd better bet on me," chuckled Margy. She unclasped a penknife she used for letter-opener and pencil sharpener and cut the cord that bound the key to the trunk.

"Presto," she said. "Compliment me, please!"

"Don't need to. You're far too conceited already," said Rose, and giggled cruelly.

She threw back the trunk cover and Margy and Helen leaned forward eagerly for a better view.

"What's that black thing over in the corner?" asked Margy, pointing to a small, dark object in the interior of the new trunk. It looked like a crumpled piece of silk.

Curiously, Rose reached for the object. As her fingers closed upon it she cried out in quick excitement:

"Why, girls, look here! This is somebody's purse!"

CHAPTER II

A Queer Discovery

"A purse!" exclaimed Margy, incredulously. "How did it ever get in there?"

"Tell me that, and I'll give you an answer!" retorted Rose.

"A very handsome one, too," observed Helen, who had taken the pocketbook from the younger girl. "Perhaps it has an identification card of some kind inside."

"Let's open it," said Rose impatiently. "There may be an interesting mystery attached to this."

"Perhaps the person who lost it would have a different opinion," suggested Margy dryly. "But you might as well open it, Helen. We may learn something about the owner."

Helen sat down on the couch with Margy and Rose, one on either side of her. The bag had a handsome clasp, a fair-sized diamond in a platinum setting.

"That stone alone is worth money," said Rose, an appraising eye on it.

"If it happens to be real," qualified Margy, and Rose shrugged impatiently.

"I wish once in a while you would stop being practical, Margy Blythe. You certainly do manage to take the joy out of life."

"Stop quarreling and look at this," said Helen. She took out a roll of bills and carefully counted them.

"Forty dollars," she said.

"And not a card of identification anywhere," stated Margy. She had made sure of this by herself rummaging thoroughly in the bag.

"That's funny," said Rose, disappointed. "You'd think there would be something, a card, or an addressed letter, that would give us a clue."

"As it is, it begins to look as if this thing had been delivered to us as a gift from the gods," said Margy, with her dry chuckle. "We can't very well give it back, since we haven't the slightest idea to whom it belongs."

"No, but we can try to find out," announced Helen, rousing from her thoughts. "There is only one thing to do, of course. We must return the purse to Lossar-Martin's. It is probable that they can trace the owner. One thing is certain, we couldn't think of keeping it."

Helen spoke in the quiet tone of authority that her two younger sisters never thought of

questioning. Being the oldest of the three girls, she had naturally stepped into the place left vacant by the death of their lovely mother.

Mrs. Blythe had succumbed to pneumonia after only a brief illness. John Blythe, the father of the girls, had not been able to live after the death of the wife he adored. Only a short time afterward, he followed her, leaving his three girls orphaned and almost penniless.

The big, old-fashioned house at Riverdale, Long Island, had been rented and not owned by the Blythes. After meeting this rent for some period, paying it from their dead father's pitifully small life insurance, the Blythe girls decided that they must go out in the world and earn their own living.

Since a small Long Island town offered little chance for the furtherance of their ambitions, they had packed up some of their furniture, their mother's prized silver and linen, and had journeyed to New York; as related in the first volume of this series, entitled, "The Blythe Girls: Helen, Margy and Rose."

In New York the girls found refuge in a five-room apartment very far uptown. But if the apartment was small, the rent was not. Faced by the vital necessity of paying the rent, of buying food and clothing for themselves, Margy and Rose set out on an immediate

search for positions that would pay them, at least, a living wage.

After many heart-breaking disappointments Margy found a position as social secretary with an eccentric old lady, Miss Dorcas Pepper by name. The latter conceived a great liking for Margy and came, in time, to treat her more as a friend than as an employee.

Rose, who had declared herself whole-heartedly for a business career, eventually found a place for herself in the magnificent Lossar-Martin department store. She started as a clerk behind the millinery trimmings counter in the millinery department. So far she had made good in her position. Her salary had been raised once, and at the time of this story's opening she was looking forward optimistically to another advance.

Helen, who had inherited her mother's artistic talent, along with her sweet face and gentle manner, had decided to continue in her chosen work. In the face of discouragement and poverty and worry, she had persevered. Her reward came at last, in the form of a market for original pictures. Mr. Bullard, the owner of a small art shop on one of the side streets, not only exhibited and sold Helen's pictures, but gave her orders for other and less ambitious work, such as the coloring of sketches. He had constituted himself her guide and critic, as

well. Mr. Bullard believed in the girl's artistic ability, and told her so.

The three sisters had made other good friends during their comparative short stay in the city.

Joe Morris, at that time manager for the Reynolds Moving Company, had helped to move the Blythe girls from Riverdale to the small uptown apartment, and since then had become the firm friend of them all—although he singled out bobbed-haired, blue-eyed Rose for special attentions.

Through Joe Morris, the girls had come to know a young man by the name of Lloyd Roberts. This young gentleman had at once been greatly attracted by Margy's brunette loveliness—she was the only one of the Blythe girls who resembled their father—and had remained in that condition of admiration ever since.

The Blythe girls had another good friend, and from the standpoint of Helen, at least, he was the best of them all. Hugh Draper, a young lawyer who lived with his mother in a first floor apartment in the apartment house occupied by the girls, had, on several occasions, served them both professionally and otherwise.

Hugh had just won his first big case, and, in the flush of this success, seemed more attractive to the girls than ever.

The details concerning these friends of the Blythe girls and of the sisters' struggles and their jolly times are given in the different volumes of this series of "The Blythe Girls" books.

Now, after a winter of work, the sisters were looking forward to their vacation. Although they were intensely interested in their various occupations and were seething with ambition for the future, the balmy breezes of spring and summer had roused in them a yearning for summer flowers and country roads, where they might leave behind them for a little while the noise and confusion of city streets.

They had been fearful at first that they would not be able to take their vacations at the same time.

Rose had been with Lossar-Martin for a short time, compared with most of the other girls in the millinery trimmings department and so was not able to pick and choose her time. As she explained to her sisters, it was only luck and the friendship of Mr. Beadle, the assistant manager, that she had been allowed a vacation at all.

She had been given two weeks early in the summer. Margy immediately approached Miss Pepper with the request that she be allowed the same two weeks.

Miss Pepper, with her usual unexpectedness,

had at first refused to give Margy any vacation at all. She had made plans to go to Europe for the summer, so it seemed, and nothing would do but Margy must go with her in her capacity of social secretary.

This plan took Margy's breath away. Helen and Rose were not far behind her in breathlessness either. What a wonderful thing for Margy! But then, they had counted on having that first vacation together!

They need not have worried, however. At the last moment, Miss Pepper changed her mind and said that, since she would remain in New York for the greater part of the summer, at any rate, Margy might take her vacation whenever it pleased her.

Margy was not quite sure whether to be pleased or very much disappointed. It would be wonderful to be with the girls. But then—Europe!

After that, just when they were beginning to believe that everything was settled—except the place where they were to go—Helen received work from Mr. Bullard that promised to take long to do.

"But, Nell, you can do your work up in the country," Rose had argued. "You can take it all along with you."

"Humph, I can just see how much work I'd

do up there," sniffed Helen. "I'll get it done before we go, if it kills me."

Whereupon she fell upon the huge bundle of prints with the fervor and zeal of a fanatic. The result was gratifying. She had "broken the back" of the work and was so far along with it that she felt justified in going on with her vacation plans.

She would sketch while up in the country—perhaps do something worth while. But that would not be work, for Helen was never happier than when allowing her fancy free rein, reproducing upon canvas as nearly as she could the scenes and gorgeous colorings of that greatest of all great artists, Nature.

So now, while Margy wrote to Crag House and Peach Farm, Helen and Rose discussed the mystery of the purse that had come to them so inexplicably, enclosed in the new trunk.

"I suppose somebody, somewhere, is feeling pretty bad about the loss of this," said Helen, turning the pocketbook thoughtfully in her hand. "Remember how I lost mine?" She referred to a time not long before when she and Rose, with their escorts, had been caught in a subway accident. During the consequent darkness and confusion Helen had lost her pocketbook. Although she had recovered it later, her feeling of chagrin and dismay over the loss remained with her.

"I remember it, all right," retorted Rose. "But you had sense enough not to park your bag in strange people's trunks. But now, to change the subject to one lots more pleasant, when do we eat?"

The next day Helen and Margy went to the trunk department at Lossar-Martin's, asked for the head of the department, and gave the purse to him.

"Well, well!" said this person, a tall, bulky, man with black hair thinning on the top of his head, "I wish we might have found this pocketbook sooner, young ladies. It would have saved us—and Laura Small—a good deal of trouble."

CHAPTER III

The Bird Has Flown

At a loss to understand this assertion, Helen and Margy continued to regard the department head with curiosity.

The latter looked up from the pocketbook he was still fingering and smiled at them.

"Strange what queer tricks fate plays," he continued. "Laura Small, one of our clerks here, was discharged because she was accused of stealing this very purse which you young ladies have so opportunely returned to me. Even I thought she had taken it. Too bad, too bad!"

"Is it too late to get in touch with her?" asked Helen sympathetically.

"I am afraid so." The black-haired man shook his head regretfully. "When a girl is discharged that way with a cloud on her name, she very generally disappears entirely. But, wait a moment—"

His expression brightened and he fingered hopefully in his vest pocket.

"I believe I have the address of her board-

ing house. Asked for it at the last minute in case we did get word of the purse or anything turned up that I thought she should know. Always liked the girl. Hoped to see her name cleared. Let's see—" He brought out a thumbed and much-worn notebook, riffled the pages until he found what he wanted. He nodded in satisfaction.

"Here's the address," he said, mentioning a street on the lower east side. "Perhaps if you young ladies would write her—or I might do it myself."

"I know a trick worth two of that," said Margy briskly. "We have an hour or two to spare now, and there's nothing to prevent our going to this address right away."

"Good!" Helen applauded. "I can't think of anything I'd enjoy more than being the bearer of good news like that."

The head of the department, who seemed a kindly and good-natured fellow, beamed upon them approvingly.

"That is extremely kind of you and I will be personally much obliged if you do this thing," he told them. "The girl was a good saleswoman. I think that, if you find her and provided she cares to return, I will be able to give her old place back to her."

Margy made a note of the address on a slip of paper she took from her own pocketbook.

Then she turned curiously to the black-haired man.

"How was it the purse happened to get lost in a new trunk?" she asked. "Have you any idea?"

"Not the least," admitted the man. "A Mrs. Platt-Brush, one of our oldest and most important customers, came in here one morning to buy a new wardrobe trunk. She became very much interested in her selection and for a moment must have laid her purse down on a counter. I presume some one in passing carelessly brushed the article into an open trunk and, as carelessly, closed the lid upon it. A queer incident, but an absolutely innocent one, I feel sure.

"When Mrs. Platt-Brush discovered her loss," he continued with another regretful shake of the head, "she immediately supposed some one had stolen it. Since Miss Small had the misfortune of waiting upon her at that time, she was naturally called upon to shoulder the responsibility and disgrace. A most unfortunate occurrence. But I have no doubt," still fingering the purse, "that it will all come right in the end."

"If we can only find Laura Small," murmured Helen, impatient to be on her way.

"Are you quite sure this pocketbook belongs

to your Mrs. Platt-Brush?" insisted Margy rather sharply.

"Naturally, I can not be sure until I interview the lady herself," replied the man. "But I do know that Mrs. Platt-Brush carried a purse of this sort, and I feel reasonably certain that this particular one belongs to her. I I am very much obliged to you," he added, as the two girls smiled and turned away.

"What a cruel and unnecessary thing," said Margy, as she and Helen pushed their way through the crowded aisles toward the store entrance. "Think of the agony this poor Laura Small must have suffered—and all over something she didn't do and probably never could have done."

"And yet, I suppose suspicion would fall upon her," said Helen. The two girls reached the great revolving doors at the entrance and pushed through them. "Do you remember the time Rose was accused of stealing plumes from the millinery trimmings counter?"

Margy nodded, her pretty mouth, for the moment, grim.

"I should think I do remember! Poor, little Posie—what a dreadful time she did go through, then!"

The girls referred to an incident that had happened to Rose very shortly after her installation with the firm of Lossar-Martin. No

wonder that Helen and Margy could feel for this poor disgraced clerk, this Laura Small! No wonder that they were so eager to take the good news to her that her name had been cleared and that she could, if she wished, return to her old position.

But when, after a long and tedious trip, the girls arrived at the address that had been given them, they found the boarding house, to be sure; but Laura Small had fled.

The landlady was a good-hearted, though rather slovenly woman, who readily gave them what meager information she herself possessed regarding her former tenant.

"A sweet girl and a good one, if ever I'm a judge," said the woman. "She paid her rent regular and never went nowheres. Used to sit upstairs in her room, reading books with strange names onto them.

"Then, one day, home she comes, looking red-eyed and wild, like she was sort of out of her head. Didn't take two looks to see that she'd been cryin' somethin' fierce. She wouldn't say nothin' to me, though." There was a plaintive note in the landlady's voice. "Just brushed right past me like I'd been the hall hatrack and went into her room. I heard her lock the door and throw herself on the bed, fit to break the springs!

"She stayed that way all the rest of that

day an' the next," continued the loquacious landlady. She was quite evidently thankful for this interested audience.

"I don't mind tellin' you young ladies, though I wouldn't whisper it to another soul, that more than once I was worried. She looked so sort of desperate-like, if you know what I mean.

"I kept knockin' on her door and all she'd do was sniff an' ask me in a queer little voice please to go away, she was all right and didn't want to be disturbed.

"I don't believe the poor child et all that time. It's a wonder she didn't starve to death, it is!"

The good woman paused to take breath and Margy seized the opportunity to ask pointedly:

"Then you don't know where she went? She left no address?"

"I was comin' to that!" The woman drew herself up with just a hint of offended dignity. "Long about noon the second day she came out to me all dressed for the street. She had a bag in her hand and I could see behind her in her room her trunk all strapped up and with a new tag onto the handle of it.

" 'You're not goin' away, lovey, are you?' I asked her, sympathetic-like, bein' sorry for her.

" 'You been mighty good to me, Miss

Murphy,' she says, kind a chokin' up and her lips tremblin'. 'But I lost my job an' I can't pay my rent no more. Here's what I owe you up to date.' And she hands me the money, all of it in silver an' a bunch of it in small coins, so I know she'd got down to pretty near her last cent."

"The poor thing!" said Helen, her dreamy eyes clouded with sympathy. "What a situation to be in!"

"Just so, Miss," said Miss Murphy, with a bob of her head. "I wasn't goin' to take the money, but she gets so near hysterical when I refuses that I couldn't do nothin' else. Just the same," she lowered her voice confidentially, "I managed to slip some of it back in her pocket when she wasn't lookin'. It was little enough the likes of me could do for her, poor thing."

"And I believe some one will be as good to you if you are ever in trouble and in such desperate need of help," said Helen. She rose reluctantly and started toward the door. "We are very much obliged to you—"

"But we are disappointed that you are not able to give us her address," finished Margy.

As they went down the rickety steps of the house the plaintive tones of Miss Murphy followed them.

"Guess she would 'a' told me where she was

goin', if she'd knowed herself, poor thing. Lucky if she didn't end up in the river."

Helen shivered and tucked an arm through Margy's.

"What a terrible thing to say!" she whispered. "That poor girl."

"It is enough to spoil the sunshine for us for a while," Margy gravely agreed. "But I can't see what more we can do than we have already done."

"I'm hungry," said Helen suddenly. "And I have money enough here," tapping her purse, "to buy plenty for us all. Margy—just suppose for a moment that my pocketbook was empty!"

"Stop it!" commanded Margy brusquely. "I don't intend to suppose any such thing. And since we can't do anything to help this poor girl, Nell," she added, in a more natural tone, "we must try to put her out of our minds. No use making ourselves miserable over something we can't possibly help."

In spite of this very sensible philosophy, the girls could not avoid thinking of Laura Small and Miss Murphy's dismal remark concerning her.

They went to a moving picture to "take their minds off the subject" and there had the misfortune to see a picture that dealt with the same theme. A clerk in one of the big depart-

ment stores, publicly disgraced and penniless, jumped from the end of a pier into a river that looked appallingly black and deep. The fact that the erstwhile clerk was rescued by the lifeguard who played the hero's rôle and recovered to live happily with him ever afterward, did little to lighten the gloom that enveloped the girls. They felt certain that no strong and handsome lifeguard would enter the life of Laura Small at the opportune moment. Therefore, the ultimate happiness of the pictured heroine made Laura Small's probable fate seem all the more dreary by contrast.

"Let's get out of this," whispered Margy, as the fade-out showed the beautiful heroine clasped in the arms of the stalwart hero. "Makes me sick! Why can't some one make a picture some time without all this silly sentimental stuff in it? It isn't true to life anyway."

Helen gave her sister a swift glance, squeezed her arm, and chuckled.

"Not every one can be as practical as you are, Margy dear," she said. They had left the dark coolness of the theater for the crowds and heat of the sidewalk and they instinctively turned their steps in the direction of the Lossar-Martin store. "Besides, I think that what we saw back there in the theater *is* true to life. If it isn't, why should the picture houses show-

ing such pictures be able to draw crowds?"

"Humph!" snorted Margy, for all the world like the eccentric old lady whose social secretary she was, "it only goes to show how many fools there are in the world. You don't mean to say," she challenged directly, "that you believe that anything like that has happened to Laura Small?"

Helen shook her head and sighed.

"I only wish I could!"

CHAPTER IV

An Unpleasant Rumor

Margy and Helen went on toward the Lossar-Martin store. Since it was nearly closing time, they decided to wait for Rose and take her uptown with them.

"There's no use standing in the sun though, while we wait," Margy suggested practically. "What do you say to going into Toft's and getting a soda?"

Helen hesitated, murmured something about "gaining too much weight" and finally capitulated.

They found the interior of Toft's candy shop cool and inviting. They had just seated themselves at a table near the open window when they saw a familiar figure swing into the establishment.

"Why, it's Dale!" cried Helen delightedly. She was about to raise her hand in a gesture that would call Dale Elton unerringly to their table when she felt the pressure of Margy's cool, firm fingers on her arm.

"Don't you dare!" said the latter, in a sibi-

lant whisper that might almost be described as a hiss. "That young and enterprising newspaperman has been following me around for a week, pestering me to go to the theater with him. I haven't the time, even if I wanted his company—which I don't!"

And Margy Blythe meant every word of it. Margy, for all her attractiveness, was openly impatient of all things that smacked of sentiment. Margy loved her career, had great ambitions for the future, and neither Lloyd Roberts nor Dale Elton counted where this ambition was concerned.

But whereas Lloyd Roberts was accustomed to accept this situation with a sort of dogged patience, Dale Elton did nothing of the sort. The young reporter, who had once had the distinction of saving Margy's life—so he claimed—believed in a less conservative policy. He carried the war into the enemy's country, as it were, the result being a series of spirited, but good-natured skirmishes, out of which Margy sometimes emerged the victor, and, sometimes, though less often, Dale himself.

Although Margy consistently snubbed this enterprising young man, she was, nevertheless, exceedingly amused by him, and described him in private as "a pest, but lots of fun." Further than this, even in her secret thoughts, Margy did not go.

So now she addressed herself diligently to the dish of ice-cream, the while she kept an eye on the youth who had so unexpectedly entered by the door

"Oh, cats, he sees us!" she cried dramatically, lifting black eyes to Helen's amused face. "I've a good mind to desert the rest of this cream and leave by the side entrance."

"Then you would be a bigger goose than I take you for," retorted Helen unfeelingly, and smiled at the young man who was making his way gladly toward them.

"I'll call this luck," said he, beaming upon them and calmly pulling out the third chair at their table. "Refreshments in the presence of young ladies whose appearance alone refreshes. Who says I am not a lucky dog?"

"Two chocolate sodas, please," to the hovering waitress, "and make 'em tall. Now tell me," he added, leaning forward and beaming upon them again, "what lucky chance brought you to this spot?"

"Answer me one, first," commanded Margy. "Was it chance that brought *you* here?"

"Absolutely!" declared young Elton, with every appearance of sincerity. "I have been busily tracking a young defaulter to his lair—"

"And I supposed you expected to find him

in Toft's, eating an ice-cream soda!" said Margy scornfully.

"And I found you, instead," went on Dale Elton, nodding gravely. "A pleasant substitute, I do assure you!"

They laughed—even Margy—and after that consumed chocolate nut sundaes while they listened to Dale Elton's amusing nonsense.

It was Helen who reminded her sister that it was five o'clock and they would miss Rose if they lingered longer in the pleasant little shop.

Dale accompanied them to the employee's entrance and there reluctantly said good-bye.

"Let me come around to-night," he pleaded of Margy, in a tone that would have touched the heart of any one less obdurate.

But Margy shook her head with decision and finality.

"School night!" she explained laconically.

Dale went off through the crowd, on his face the mournful expression it usually wore after an encounter with Margy. Helen looked at her younger sister questioningly.

"I can't understand why you treat Dale as you do, Margy Blythe," she said, in a tone of mild exasperation. "If I were that young newspaper reporter, I'd never come near you again."

"He likes it," retorted Margy hard-heart-

edly. "You notice he always comes back for more, don't you?"

Helen was about to retort, but Rose came out of the store entrance at that moment and they both went forward to meet her.

Annabelle Black was with her and greeted the girls with her usual rather boisterous cordiality.

Annabelle was employed at Lossar-Martin's and worked at the same counter in the same department as Rose. She was tall and generously proportioned; had dark hair and eyes and heavy black brows that almost met over her large, but well-shaped nose.

Annabelle had been Rose's first friend at Lossar-Martin's and since the departure of quiet Birdie North, who had worked behind the counter with them, had remained by far her best one.

Birdie North had, only a short time before, married a former floorwalker at Lossar-Martin's. Since the young man proved to be a childhood sweetheart of Birdie's, the situation was a very romantic one.

Drew had inherited a large department store in Buffalo. In that city, Birdie joined him, and in a short time became his wife.

Now, though both Rose and Annabelle Black were as talkative and seemed as cheerful as usual, Helen sensed that something was wrong.

Beneath the girls' light chatter and laughter, she saw that they were actually depressed and inclined to be thoughtful.

After the sisters had left Annabelle and turned toward home, Helen slipped an arm through her younger sister's and asked if anything was wrong.

Rose looked up, her pretty mouth twisting in a rueful smile.

"No use trying to keep anything from you, Nell," she said. "I declare you read my thoughts before I've thought them sometimes."

"It's only because I am very much interested and want you to be happy," Helen reminded her gently.

"Of course you do, you old precious. Don't you suppose I know it?"

Rose was silent for a moment, and her young face grew grave. Margy and Helen regarded her with real concern.

"I suppose I'm silly to worry about it, and I suppose it's only a rumor anyway." Rose tried to laugh lightly and failed. "But the truth is, girls, word has been passed about that Lossar-Martin's is about on the rocks."

Margy was so astonished she stopped still in the street and brought the others to a standstill with her.

"Not Lossar-Martin's!" she cried incredu-

lously. "Why, I thought that store was as safe as a bank."

"Even banks have run on rocks once in a while," Rose reminded her. "Oh, I suppose it is all a foolish rumor," she continued, in a lighter tone. "But it has been enough to make all the girls feel uneasy. Not much fun to be thrown out of our jobs in the middle of summer with positions as scarce as snowflakes."

"No fun whatever!" agreed Margy thoughtfully. "Lossar-Martin's now, who could have believed such a thing!"

"Well, I'm quite sure *I* don't believe it," said Helen stoutly. "It seems perfectly ridiculous to me, even to think that a store like Lossar-Martin's could fail. Why, every time you go in it, even early in the morning before the real crowds come, you think you are in a bridge crush or a subway jam! They must do a tremendous business."

"Their profits are tremendous," Rose agreed. "But one never can tell what the men at the top are doing, you know. One dishonest official," she added, with the new wisdom gained from contact with the business world, "can make the largest profits look sick!"

"Well, don't worry, Rose," said Margy, in the matter-of-fact tone that always brought comfort and reassurance. "If you don't keep

your job, we won't all starve to death, child. There is still my 'inheritance.' "

Margy referred to the twenty-five hundred dollars in liberty bonds, left her by her Aunt Margaret Blythe of Pogartown, Iowa, and which, with the deduction of a trifling amount of the coupons due, she had placed safely in the bank.

"And you could always go out to Buffalo," laughed Helen. "Birdie would welcome you with open arms, and I am quite sure Chester Drew could always find a place for you in his store."

Rose made a face at this and squeezed Helen's arm more tightly within her own.

"It would be like asking favors now," she said. "And, anyway, how could I leave my beloved family? No, I shan't consider that just at present."

On the way uptown Margy and Helen related their experiences of the day; how they had returned the purse, and their consequent vain attempt to reach Laura Small with their good news.

Rose listened with interest to the story of this girl and shook her golden head regretfully over the conclusion of it.

"And if we had found the purse a day or two sooner, you might have reached her in time."

"We would surely have reached her in time," retorted Margy.

Helen removed her hat and smoothed her fair hair with practiced fingers. Then she went swiftly to the kitchen.

She took out the platter of corned beef hash that they had had left over from the night before. With this warming in a pan on the stove, she turned her attention to some biscuits. She had these stirred up and in the oven in a marvelously short time.

"Now, the eggs," she said, and was not conscious of having spoken aloud until a chuckle from the doorway caused her to glance up and meet the blue laughing eyes of her youngest sister.

Rose threw reckless young arms about her, nearly wrecking a dozen fresh eggs.

Helen gasped, retrieved the eggs and not only submitted to the hug, but returned it.

"What's the matter now, crazy child? Goodness! are those biscuits burning or is it the hash?"

"The hash wins," said Rose gayly, as she turned down the gas under the pan. "Nell, are those eggs done or are they not? I must have dinner. The smell of this delectableness is driving me mad."

"Before you go quite mad, you might an-

swer the doorbell," said Margy, appearing in the doorway. "It just rang."

"Why don't you do it yourself, lazybones?" queried Rose, as she started down the hall.

"Well, one thing is certain," said Helen. She peered into the oven and whirled the biscuits around with an experienced hand. "If that is any one to dinner he will have to take hash."

"It's Joe Morris," said Margy, hearing the sound of a masculine voice.

"Well," sighed Helen resignedly, "there are plenty of biscuits, anyway."

CHAPTER V

More Worries

Joe Morris came breezily into the kitchen. He was so much at home in the Blythe apartment that ordinary formalities had long since been abandoned.

"Well, I arrived just in the nick of time, didn't I?" he asked, sniffing appreciatively. "Corned beef hash, wow! And biscuits *and* rice pudding."

Over his shoulder Rose made a face at the cook.

"You see, that's all he comes for, Nell—something to eat," she said. "If I were you I wouldn't give him a thing."

"The poor boy hath a hungry eye," said Helen relentingly. She turned the hash in the pan, exposing a temptingly crisp, golden-brown surface.

Joe groaned as if in ecstasy. He took a step forward, but Helen waved him unfeelingly toward the door.

"Go in there and help Rose set the table or you don't get a thing," she told him. "Be

quick about it, too. Everything is ready to take up."

"Welcome words!" cried Joe, and dashed into the dining room where he was more hindrance than help. In spite of the fact that he had been to dinner in the Blythe apartment many times, Joe could never remember which place was which or on which side the forks belonged. He invariably put the napkins at the wrong plates and spread the cups around instead of grouping them all near Helen's place where she liked to have them.

But in doing all this he seemed so happy and so certain that Rose would never be able to get along at all without his help that the girl never had the heart to stop him.

The hash and biscuits, borne pridefully by Helen and Margy, were royally received and soon—were not! The rice pudding followed—Helen's rice pudding, famous for its creamy deliciousness—and over this Joe became expansive.

He told them what had been rumored for some weeks; that the moving company by which he was employed had been reorganized.

"It is now the Interstate Moving Corporation, if you please," he announced. "Another cup of that excellent tea, if I can trouble you, Helen—"

"Two lumps or one?"

"Three, please!"

"Pig!" said Rose.

"They're little ones," said Joe defensively, holding up a lump. "I don't believe I ever saw such little ones."

"For goodness' sake, give him sixty if he wants them, Nell," said Margy. "He forgets this is my school night and that I'm more interested in the reorganization of his company than in how many lumps of sugar he takes in his tea. I never saw such a fellow."

"Such a fine one, you mean, don't you?" queried Joe, and grinned at her. "All right," he added hastily, as Margy appeared about to rise and haughtily leave the table. "Don't get mad. I'll behave. Let's see, where was I?"

"Not far from where you are now," giggled Rose.

This time, in spite of the fact that she looked very lovely sitting there, chin cupped in hands, bobbed, golden curls distractingly rumpled, the young employee of the Interstate Moving Company resolutely ignored her.

"We are really engaged in a serious occupation," he told the interested girls. "The 'Interstate' ships silks and other costly merchandise. On an especially valuable load yours truly is sent along to make sure it reaches its destination in safety."

Helen poured herself another cup of tea and drank it in leisurely fashion. Margy's eyes gleamed, and she leaned toward Joe across the table.

"What fun!" she said. "I suppose you have to carry a gun?"

Rose started and her smile vanished.

"Joe," she cried, "is it *that* dangerous?"

Joe turned to her quickly, his face flushed with boyish pleasure at the concern underlying her words.

"Nothing for my friends to worry about, Posie," he said. "Of course there is a certain responsibility and, on long trips, more than a chance of a hold-up. Still, we are all well-armed and on our guard, so that there is really very little actual danger."

"What fun!" said Margy again. "Wouldn't I like to be in your place for a little while, Joe Morris!"

"And leave Miss Pepper without a secretary?" teased Joe. "Naughty, naughty!"

"But it isn't anything to laugh about, really," said Rose with seriousness. "Why, I read in the paper last night that a truck of that sort was held up."

"Was anybody hurt?" Helen interjected swiftly.

Rose gave her a queer look.

"Both the truckman and the guard with him were killed," she said quietly.

"I bet the paper didn't say what happened to the other fellow," said Joe, with a forced lightness.

But neither Rose nor Helen would smile. Margy alone seemed unaffected by this announcement.

"That's the fortune of war," she said calmly.

Rose looked at her and her eyes flashed.

"That sounds all right, if you say it in a hurry," she retorted. "But when you try to bring it home to your friends it gets far too personal for comfort. I reckon if you saw Joe lying by the roadside with a bullet in him you wouldn't stand there and say, 'It's the fortune of war.' "

"I'm quite certain I wouldn't," said Margy calmly, as she pushed back her plate and rose from the table. "Something tells me I would be running for a doctor. Which reminds me that I must run along now—and in a hurry—if I expect to get to school in time."

Although the night school Margy attended closed its regular sessions for the summer, they were running a special summer course that Margy insisted upon taking, despite the objections of her sisters and their suggestion that she abandon night work during the hot

weather. But Margy was the sort of person who can take no enjoyment whatever in idleness. She must be busy to be happy.

Now, as she returned to the dining room, hatted and cloaked, to say good-bye to Helen and Rose, the doorbell rang.

"I'll answer it," she said, as Helen started to get up. "I am going straight to Miss Pepper's from school, Nell; so don't expect me back to-night."

They listened as she opened the front door. Helen half rose, thinking that the new arrival might be Hugh Draper from the apartment below.

But the next moment she knew this was not so.

"You again!" Margy's voice came to them in displeased accents. "If persistency was a virtue, Dale Elton, you'd be altogether too good for this world."

"I am anyway," they heard Dale answer. "Only, you don't know it yet!"

The door closed behind Margy, cutting off her answer, but the girls could guess at the nature of it.

"That newspaper man sure does love to be treated rough," chuckled Joe, left alone with Helen and Rose. "I suppose, in his profession, you can't afford to have any feelings."

"Well, I have plenty of feelings and they're

every one of them lazy," confessed Helen plaintively. "The very thought of turning to these dishes fills me with distress."

"Then don't think of 'em," advised Rose, rising briskly. "Joe and I are going to do 'em anyway. Aren't we, Joe?"

"You bet," agreed Joe.

Rose and Joe easily overruled Helen's faint protests. After settling her in a big chair with the evening paper for company, they went to work with a will at the dishes.

While they worked, Rose told Joe about the purse they had found in the new trunk, about Laura Small, her disgrace, and her disappearance from her boarding house.

"Tough luck! But she'll turn up at Lossar-Martin's some time, wanting her old job back," said Joe comfortably.

"Maybe—if there is any Lossar-Martin's left by that time," returned Rose ruefully.

She explained, in response to Joe's surprised question, about the rumor of financial difficulties in the Lossar-Martin store. Joe scoffed, as the girls had done, but became thoughtful just the same.

Pretty tough luck for Rose, if she were to lose her position in summer, when good openings, or, in fact, openings of any kind, were so scarce! Joe thought of the time when he himself had been out of a job. How royally

WHILE THEY WORKED, ROSE TOLD JOE ABOUT THE PURSE.
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Rose had helped him to a new one! Good little sport!

They returned to the dining room and the first thing Rose saw was the paper, discarded by Helen in favor of a magazine. A headline on the first page caught her eye.

"Look!" she cried. "There's the report of another hold-up. Oh, Joe, you've got to be careful!"

CHAPTER VI

A Surprise

Together Rose and Joe read the account of the hold-up. The road bandits were getting braver. Attacks on the open roads were becoming almost a daily occurrence. So daring were the robberies and yet so cunningly carried out that the police were completely baffled.

"H'm, doesn't take much to do that!" snorted Joe, as he took the paper from Rose and folded it so that the staring article was invisible. "This thing hints at a master mind, a leader of a daring gang of criminals. And probably they're no more than an east side gang of gunmen. Makes you sick!"

"One of their bullets would make you sicker," suggested Rose moodily, and then was forced to laugh with Joe at her own forebodings.

"I suppose it *is* foolish to worry," she told him, when he was bidding her good-night. "But I do wish you would look out for yourself, Joe. There's no using taking unnecessary chances."

"Don't worry," the young man returned. "Life's too sweet, as long as Helen continues to make such corned beef hash and biscuits to take any chances with it. They'll never get me, except over my dead body."

But, joke about it as he might, they both realized that, in his new capacity, Joe would often ride into danger. This in itself would have been a source of worry to Rose. Add to it the fact that rumors concerning the insolvency of the Lossar-Martin store were becoming daily more persistent and circumstantial, and it can be seen that the younger girl's state of mind was not particularly enviable.

Meantime the Blythe girls were expecting a reply from the two summer places, Crag House and Peach Farm.

The first response to Margy's letters came from Crag House. The proprietor painted his place in the most glowing terms and since his prices were reasonable—under what, in fact, the girls had expected to pay—they decided to engage rooms at once.

Since this was Monday and their vacation started on the following Saturday, there was no time to lose.

"One big room with a double bed and a cot in it ought to be enough for us, don't you think?" Helen asked them. "We'll be out-

doors almost all the time anyway, so it won't matter where we sleep."

"As long as the dining room is big enough, we don't care," returned Rose. "I begin to feel my vacation appetite coming on already!"

So they wrote to Crag House, engaging a room. This letter had hardly been sent when they received one from Peach Farm. This latter said scarcely anything about the place itself, merely quoting the price of rooms, which was a little over the amount the girls had allowed for the two weeks.

"I guess we shall be more than satisfied with our choice of a summer place," said Helen comfortably. "And how I do love that name, 'Crag House.'"

How little did she know when she spoke how soon and how vehemently she would call back those words!

Meanwhile, Margy was very busy at Miss Pepper's Riverside Drive house. The energetic old lady was determined to wind up all her affairs—at least, all that Margy had anything to do with—before the girl went on her vacation.

"For, as you know," she condescended to explain, "I can't stand figures, papers, notes, messy things. Never could make head nor tail of them. Come back soon, my dear. Find me snowed under, if you don't. Now let's get

to work. Wait a minute!" she interrupted herself and glared sharply at Margy.

Margy stared calmly back, having become accustomed to her employer's eccentricities.

"Yes?" she queried.

"Something I forgot!" Miss Pepper turned to her desk and from a pigeonhole drew forth a small flat envelope.

This she handed to the other, who fingered it curiously. Across the back of the envelope in Miss Pepper's straggling hand were written the words, "Margy Blythe. For lollypops and merry-go-rounds."

Accustomed as she was to her employer, Margy could not help being surprised.

"But what is it?" she queried.

"Open it—find out!" snapped her employer.

Margy promptly obeyed and drew from the envelope a twenty-dollar bill.

"B-but, this can't be for me," she stammered. "For l-lolly-pops and merry-go-rounds! Why, it's far too much. Miss Pepper, I don't understand—"

"They say money talks," snapped the abrupt old person. "If this doesn't, certainly funny."

"You are very generous—very kind," murmured Margy, embarrassed because she knew Miss Pepper's dislike of thanks of any kind and yet felt the need of thanking her. "I certainly didn't expect—"

"Certainly not. If you'd expected it you probably wouldn't have got it! Now let's work!" At which Margy was left with a feeling she often experienced in regard to her employer, at once angry and amused.

Nevertheless, she put the twenty-dollar bill safely away in her pocket with the conviction that it would most certainly come in handy. Twenty-dollar bills at summer resorts had the habit of melting like mist before the dawn!

Later that afternoon, when Margy was about to enter the room that was hers when at the home of her employer, she was startled by a noise within it. She opened the door, and, with an effort, stifled the cry that rose to her lips.

A man was standing before her dresser, his back to the door.

CHAPTER VII

The Intruder

The man must have seen Margy in the mirror over the dresser. For, as she entered the room, he turned toward her in a calm and leisurely fashion.

"Hello," he said pleasantly, and she recognized the bland smile and boyish face of Miss Pepper's rather rascally young nephew, Rex Pepper. "I hope I didn't startle you."

"If you don't get out of here this minute," said Margy coldly, "I will call the servants and have them put you out."

"No, I don't think you will do that," said Pepper, still smiling. "Especially when I explain to you that I was merely after the address of your summer place. I had no designs, I assure you, on the family jewels."

"If that is my notebook you have in your hand," said Margy, as steadily as she could, "please give it to me."

"With the greatest of pleasure, if you will just bear with me for a moment—"

And while Margy watched him, beside her-

self with anger, yet helpless, he deliberately copied the address of Crag House in his own gold-mounted notebook. This he restored to his pocket and smiled.

"I have been thinking of motoring up that way soon," he explained easily. "I may surprise you by dropping in upon you at this place with the—ah—charmingly rustic name."

"You will do more than surprise me!" cried Margy. She closed the door behind him as he sauntered out and fiercely turned the key in the lock. "The insufferable c-cad!"

And then, to her sheer disgust, she began to cry in furious anger.

"You'd just better try coming to Crag House!" she cried, shaking her small brown fist at an imaginary Rex Pepper. "I'd show you! Or if I couldn't, Lloyd Roberts or Dale Elton would."

Curious how comforting the thought of Dale was—even though she was quite sure she liked Lloyd Roberts better!

Margy decided to say nothing of this encounter to her sisters. Rex Pepper had been a thorn in her side ever since she had entered Miss Pepper's employ.

The young fellow was rich and spoiled and idle, with nothing to do but get into mischief. He admired Margy and was considerably annoyed to find this emotion unreturned. But he

was one of the kind who never can be completely discouraged. The more Margy evaded him, the more he determined to force her to accept his attentions.

No, to tell the girls about it would only worry them, besides not helping her own problem in the least.

However, she made up her mind to one thing. Should Rex Pepper again enter her room, the outrage should at once be made known to her employer. Margy had great faith in that lady's ability to handle her rascally young nephew.

But if Margy expected further annoyances on the part of Rex Pepper after her discovery of him in her room, she was very agreeably disappointed.

The young fellow failed to put in an appearance during the entire week, and as the day neared when she and Helen and Rose were to start on their vacation, Margy breathed a sigh of relief.

"If only something would happen to take Rex Pepper to China," she communed with herself, as she fitted her perky small hat over the mass of dark hair which she had not had bobbed, "I think I could be completely happy."

It was five o'clock on Friday afternoon. Margy's work was done and she was ready for the trip to the little uptown apartment. She

felt that her vacation had actually begun. And with the thought, her spirits soared.

"Two whole weeks and nothing to do but enjoy myself!" She raised her arms and stretched luxuriously before the mirror. "No Rex Pepper, no shorthand, no letters to write, no nothing. Oh, joy!"

She gathered up purse and gloves and went to the door. She opened it softly and stepped out into the heavily carpeted hall.

Miss Pepper had said good-bye to her before. There was no use disturbing the old lady again. She would undoubtedly be annoyed.

Swiftly Margy went down the stairs and reached the front door—only to be confronted there by Rex Pepper himself.

With her heart beating a little quickly she waited for him to step out of the way. Instead, he said, in his good-humored way, exactly as though nothing unpleasant had happened between them:

"Well, this *is* luck! I have my car outside, If you are going uptown, Miss Margy, I can have you there in a jiffy."

"That is very kind of you," said Margy sweetly. "But if you are quite sure the subways are still running—"

Rex Pepper's brow darkened and he stepped quickly aside.

"Quite sure!" he said stiffly, and disappeared in the direction of the library.

When Margy reached the street she chuckled.

"Made him mad that time! Why is it I always love to make him mad?"

Meanwhile, in the little uptown apartment where she had been feverishly busy all day, Helen was receiving a caller.

Hugh Draper had come up to see if he could help in any way and to say good-bye.

"You look worn out," he told Helen, as she sank wearily into a chair and motioned him to another one.

"Tired but happy," Helen smiled up at him. "Do you realize, Hugh, that to-morrow we start on our vacation?"

CHAPTER VIII

Getting Ready

"I realize it only too well, Helen," Hugh Draper said ruefully. "This old cliff dwelling won't seem the same without you. If you don't believe me, ask mother."

Mrs. Draper was Hugh's widowed mother and from the time of Hugh's accident, when Helen had helped to nurse the young fellow back to health and strength, she and the Blythe girls had been firm friends.

"Speaking of mother," Hugh added: "She wants you all to come downstairs for dinner to-night. She says she knows you must be tired to death and won't feel like getting a meal."

"Bless her heart!" said Helen fervently. "No one but your mother, Hugh Draper, would think of a thing like that. I *was* dreading fussing over a hot stove to-night."

"Then that's settled," said Hugh contentedly. "Shall I be in the way?" he added, with a comprehensive glance about the littered living room. "Or may I stay and talk to you for a while?"

"You may," replied Helen, "as long as you don't ask me to talk. I'm too tired to make the effort. Now tell me, Hugh, about the new case. Is it coming on as you expected?"

"Not quite," admitted the young lawyer, his eyes clouding and narrowing as they did whenever his profession was mentioned. "The state has a pretty strong case, but I believe we can win it."

Thereupon he launched into a spirited recital of some of the main points of the law case, finding Helen, as always, an interested and sympathetic listener.

The young lawyer had handled his first big case only a short time before and won it. Helen and Hugh often recalled the day of his triumph when they had walked for hours in the bitter weather while he buoyantly told her of his success.

Since then, other big cases had come his way and it was the last of these that they were discussing on this particular afternoon.

They were so absorbed that when a key rattled in the lock they were startled and Hugh looked sheepishly at his watch.

"I've just about talked my head off," he said penitently. He got to his feet as Margy came in with a merry greeting. "See you downstairs in a little while, Helen. Mother

says dinner at six-thirty. A thousand apologies for keeping you so long."

Helen smiled her slow, dreamy smile at him.

"You needn't apologize," she said. "I liked it!"

They were all in high spirits that evening. Mrs. Draper saw to it that the dinner was excellent. But, it is safe to say, the girls did not know what they were eating except that it was good.

What did mere food matter when two marvelous weeks of freedom stretched ahead of them?

"I almost wish we had chosen Peach Farm," said Margy that night, as they were getting ready for bed. "Somehow, it sounds better than Crag House to me."

"Well, we can't change now, even if we were foolish enough to want to—all apologies to you, my dear sister," said Rose, stretching her arms above her golden head and yawning prodigiously. "You will adore Crag House when you see it. Won't she, Nell?"

"I certainly hope so," returned Helen, coming out of a reverie that must have been pleasant, judging from the smile that hovered about her mouth.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Margy, regarding the older girl quizzically.

Helen flushed.

"I wasn't thinking about anything in particular," she evaded.

"Wouldn't Hugh be flattered," giggled Rose. "Just wait till I tell him!"

"Better hurry up, if you're going to," advised Margy dryly. "You haven't a great deal of time, seeing that we're leaving early to-morrow morning."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that," retorted Rose, with feigned innocence, though she watched Helen slyly out of the corner of her eye. "I have a feeling that Hugh may be planning to take a vacation soon himself."

Helen glanced at her, bit her lip, and laughed helplessly.

"You are a dreadful nuisance, Rosebud," she scolded. "And just for that I'm not going to tell you a thing."

"Please! Pretty, please," coaxed Rose, putting a soft cheek against her sister's and rumpling her hair.

But when Helen still shook her head resolutely, Rose laughed and made a gay little pirouette about the room, coming to rest on tip-toe before the older girl.

"You don't have to tell me, you disagreeable old dear," she said. "Because I happened to overhear Hugh remark that if he could leave his case long enough he might join us for a few days!"

"Well, that wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen," said Helen mildly. "And now if you are quite through doing calisthenics and falling over the trunks, I might suggest that we go to bed."

"Isn't she a terrible old grouch," complained Rose plaintively. She paused and contemplated thoughtfully the new trunk from Lossar-Martin's, the one in which they had discovered the purse belonging to Mrs. Platt-Brush.

"I wonder if anything has been heard of that Laura Small," she mused. "Poor thing! I would like to know what has become of her!"

"Well, you're not likely to," retorted Margy, unencouragingly. "And now, if you value your beauty sleep, do come to bed. You won't want to get up in the morning."

"I never do, anyway," said the younger girl, yawning. "So I can't see what difference it makes."

After some persuasion and many threats the older sisters managed to get Rose to bed. Margy, who was the last, put out the light. As she did so the thought was in her mind:

"Did Rex Pepper mean that he really intended to motor up to Crag House? If he does, what shall I say, how can I explain it to the girls?" With this question still unanswered, she finally fell asleep.

The three sisters were up betimes the next morning. For once Rose, the sleepy-head, was wide awake at six o'clock and radiantly eager for the great adventure of the day.

By seven o'clock, when the expressmen called for their trunks and bags, the girls had everything packed, breakfast prepared and eaten, and the apartment tidied up.

That the tidying up process was a bit sketchy was to be expected, since they were to take the nine-thirty train from the Grand Central Terminal.

Rose was impatient with the breakfast dishes, declaring that they could be scraped up and left until they got back. But in this Helen was adamant.

"I couldn't enjoy a minute of my vacation if I had to think about coming back to a lot of dirty dishes," she said.

"There aren't a lot," Rose complained, as she impatiently reached for a dish towel. "And I don't see how they could hurt anything. However, there's the model housekeeper, for you."

"Ought to be glad Nell *is* careful," said Margy. She reached briskly for a towel and set to work on the diminishing pile of dishes on the drainboard. "If you'd talk less and work more Rose Blythe, you'd be better off."

"Oh, is that so!" retorted Rose. "Who's talking now, I'd like to know!" And the face

she made at her older sister was distinctly impudent—"if you are to take Margy's word for it—and she ought to know!" laughed Helen.

Hugh was to see them over to the station. He had ordered a taxicab for that purpose.

"Just like we were millionaires or something!" Rose cried exuberantly. "Here's one of the times when a rising young barrister comes in handy. If he orders taxis when he's only rising, I wonder what we'll be riding in when he's riz!"

"Poor Hugh, you speak of him as though he were a yeast cake," Helen reproved her, even while she joined in the laugh.

In the midst of their discussion over the dishes, the horn of the taxicab sounded in the street below.

"Didn't I tell you?" cried Rose, flinging down her towel and rushing to the window. "There's the cab and we're not ready!"

"Come back here, youngster," said Margy sternly. "You have overlooked a fork."

"You may have the pleasure!" exclaimed the grinning Rose, and disappeared into the bedroom for her hat. It was a small affair of black lace and rosebuds, and this was to be it's first appearance on the golden head of Rose Blythe. No wonder she was in a hurry!

"Come on, Nell." Margy hung up the dish towel and took Helen by the arm. "You don't

have to polish the silver, you know. Oh, Helen, aren't we going to have a lark?"

Hugh came up to advise them—unnecessarily—of the arrival of the taxicab. They made him wait in the front room while they adjusted smart new hats at exactly the right angle.

Then down to the taxicab, the sober halls ringing with the sound of their laughter. Mrs. Draper met them in the lower hall and wished them good luck and a merry time.

Arrived at the curb where the cab awaited them, the girls had their first big surprise. Instead of the empty vehicle they had expected, they found that the cab was already occupied. At their approach two young men sprang from within it and stood at attention, one on either side of the door.

"Joe Morris!" cried Rose.

"Lloyd!" said Margy. "What does all this nonsense mean?"

"And that's all the credit we get for planning a joyful surprise," said Joe, exchanging with Lloyd a glance of mock dismay. "How we did flatter ourselves!"

CHAPTER IX

The Start

"Right you are!" said Rose cheerfully. But as she stepped into the cab she patted Joe on the shoulder, as though in that way to make up for the harshness of her words. "But since you *are* here, we might as well go. No use missing the train!"

Of course Joe had a great deal to say about the heartlessness of girls in general and of Rose in particular. But he said it all after the taxicab was in motion and in a hubbub that completely drowned his plaint.

As a matter of fact, both Margy and Rose were pleased that the boys had cared enough to want to see them off.

The station was reached in plenty of time for the train.

The boys insisted upon buying for the girls candy and magazines enough to last them from New York to the Pacific Coast.

"We'll be on the train only about three hours," Helen laughingly reminded them. "For goodness' sake, save your money. You may need it."

But the boys refused to consider any such "piker propaganda"—the term was Joe's—and continued to press the girls with gifts up to the moment when the train they were to take was called.

There was a general rush for the gates, and there was much laughter when Joe dropped a basket of fruit. Grapes and oranges and apples rolled everywhere, to the delight of various children in the crowd.

There was no time to collect more than a fraction of the basket's contents, and Joe looked rueful.

"Guess I'd better go back and get another one," he said, and was dashing through the crowd when Rose caught him by the coat tails.

"Don't be so silly!" she commanded. "Can't you see we have more here than we can use? I wouldn't miss this train for the best basket of fruit in captivity."

They were passing through the gate, the boys following in spite of the guard, when Margy heard a familiar hail and turned in time to see Dale Elton dashing through the crowd after them.

"There he is again," she sighed. "Like a bad penny."

"He'll break his neck—or some one's else—if he doesn't look out," giggled Rose, watching the mad approach with interest. "There he

goes—bowling over that white-haired old gentleman. Isn't he the limit?"

"He's every bit of that," said Margy and gave a sniff.

"And you tell him so too," chuckled Rose. "You two are a constant delight to your friends."

Dale dashed through the gate—the guard was an old acquaintance—and caught up to them as they reached the day coach in which the Blythe girls were to make the trip.

"Pity you wouldn't wait for a fellow," he gasped. "Pretty near broke my neck—here, Margy, is the biggest box of candy I could find, on the run. If you don't want it, throw it out the window."

"Good gracious!" murmured Rose, in a tone of self-communion. "Five pounds, if it's an ounce! What are we ever going to do with it all?"

They were on board at last. The boys saw them comfortably seated and piled their luggage and some of the candy boxes and magazines in the rack over their heads.

There was a large amount of rather incoherent conversation and a good deal of glaring between Lloyd Roberts and Dale Elton, the young and persistent news reporter. Neither Dale nor Lloyd could understand in the least why the other had been born! As Dale once

rather crudely put it, they loved each other "like a rat loved poison!"

However, they had little time to indulge their animosity on this occasion.

In an astonishingly short time the conductor yelled his warning. The train began to move before the boys decided it was time for them to do likewise.

"Don't forget to write," Hugh said, bending over Helen. "And if it's possible at all, I'll spend a few days with you at Crag House."

At the same time Dale crowed in Margy's rather unresponsive ear: "For once you cannot foil me, Margy Blythe. I shall put your name in the paper. A society item, you understand. Charming young society woman, secretary to the richest old crank on Riverside Drive and—"

"The train's moving!" warned Margy. "And if you say anything against Miss Pepper, I will throw you off myself!"

"Nevertheless, I shall have the news item. You can't stop me, young woman!" With this defiance Dale departed, masterfully pushing Lloyd down the aisle before him.

Joe was the last to leave. As a matter of fact, he came very near being left on the train.

He was eating fruit out of the basket he had given Rose, and whether it was the fruit or the girl that fascinated him—very possibly it

was both—he could not, it seemed, tear himself away.

"If you are going with us, pray sit down," said Rose, with polite sarcasm. "You may get tired, standing all the way."

But when he was gone, on a mad dash for the door, she repented enough to call after him:

"Don't get shot before we see you again, Joe!" She was referring to trips he would be called upon to make for his new company as guard on trucks carrying valuable merchandise. But the other passengers of the car did not know this. Several of the latter glanced at Rose curiously.

"They will think Joe is a gunman," said Margy, remarking the glances. "You should be more discreet when you shout at the top of your lungs, Rose love."

"As your good friend, Miss Dorcas Pepper, would remark—rubbish!" said Rose, and leaned far out of the window to wave one last good-bye to the "gunman."

They were off! The train gathered speed, pounding rhythmically over the rails.

"Ain't we got fun!" chanted Rose, leaning back contentedly.

"Posie, your language gets worse and worse," sighed Helen. She smiled at the pretty, animated face beneath the black hat

opposite her. "You are at once the despair and delight of my life."

"I get it all from that new Dean girl at the store," explained Rose, with disarming docility. "Her 'langwidge' is something frightful. When she and Annabelle have a quarrel about anything—and they are always having 'em—you would die laughing, just to hear the awful slang."

"If the Dean girl, whoever she is, can talk any better slang than Annabelle," remarked Margy, "she must be good."

"She is!" returned Rose. Some day when we get back to the city I'll invite them both to the house. It will be as good as a show."

"And cheaper," said Helen, who, as guardian of the family purse strings, must needs consider such mundane things.

They were talkative and merry at first. But after the first hour they settled back to enjoy the ever-changing scenery. The sensation of speed, the steady, rhythmic pounding of the wheels, thrilled them, filled them with a sense of freedom, of adventure.

"The country—smell it!" murmured Helen. "I've been so hungry for a breath of fresh, untainted air, and I never knew it. Girls, I want to paint!"

Her sisters glanced at her fondly and laughed.

"If you try it here, I imagine you would be very likely to spill the beans—"

"You mean the paint, Margy," chuckled Rose. "Guess you'd better wait, Nell darling, until we get something more substantial under our feet than this rocking horse of a train. My, but I'm hungry!"

"Eat some more fruit," suggested Margy, and with an expression of disgust Rose pushed the pretty basket from her.

"If any one says 'fruit' to me for the next year, I'll eat them too," she threatened. "I hate the sight of it."

"To-morrow will witness a change of heart," murmured Margy. "Meanwhile, there's no use wasting it. You might hand it over here!"

When they were still about half an hour's ride from their destination, it was necessary for the girls to change cars at a junction. The main line did not run past Grangeville, the station nearest the Crag House.

The Blythe girls had looked forward to this change with dismay. With all their luggage and magazines and other paraphernalia forced upon them by the generosity of the boys, they questioned how they were going to manage to get out of this train and into another one without disaster.

"We'd have to get out at Grangeville anyway," Margy, the practical, reminded them.

"All we have to do is to imagine there's a fire in the car back of us."

"My, aren't you cheerful-minded?" remarked Rose, as she began resolutely to gather odd packages together. "I'm sure I've lost about half the things already. Haven't I another bag?"

"You ought to know," retorted Margy. "I've everything belonging to me."

"As long as I have my portfolio and painting materials, I don't care what else I lose," said Helen, still dreaming of the picture she hoped to paint once she had reached her destination.

"Humph, you might change your mind, when you find your best nightie gone—to say nothing of your toothbrush. Do you suppose you can buy a toothbrush in the country?"

"I suppose the farmers wash their teeth," giggled Rose. "And it's safe to say the brushes don't grow on trees."

The train reached the junction then, and after several false starts, skirmishes and breathless ejaculations, the sisters managed to reach the platform.

"I do believe we have everything, too," marveled Rose. "Girls, as Martha Dean would say, we're some punkins!"

"Look at that child!" cried Margy so abruptly that her sister started.

She pointed to a child, a small boy, who had broken away from a burly man and was running down the station platform. Near the girls he swerved and ran into some trees and bushes at the side of the platform.

The man pursued the small boy, brandishing his fist and muttering under his breath.

CHAPTER X

Three Rascals

Before the Blythe girls were aware of it, they found themselves running too.

Only a few steps further they came out upon a narrow road. This had been effectually screened by the trees and bushes near the station. For this reason the girls had failed to see the small Ford car standing there. Two men were beside it, and as the boy and his pursuer broke through the bushes they grinned evilly.

Evidently the child had known no more of the presence of the car in the road than had the girls. He tried to double on his tracks when he saw it, but the burly man reached out a hand and caught him by the collar.

As the child writhed about in that grip, the girls saw his face. It was twisted and agonized with fear.

The man raised his hand; brought it down heavily upon the lad. A shriek and more blows, heavy, vicious, striking the boy to the ground.

Helen started forward.

"For shame!" she cried. "How dare you strike a child like that!"

The man paused, turned upon her an astonished face.

"For the love of—" he said, then began to laugh, his great mouth stretched in leering mirth, his fat sides shaking.

One of the men standing by the car stepped forward; took the laughing man by the shoulders and shook him roughly.

"Come out of it, Bill," he growled. "Don't be a fool. Put the kid in the car. We've got to beat it."

At this the man stopped laughing. He turned fiercely upon his companion, shaking his shoulder free.

"Keep your dirty paws off me," he snarled. "And you, you little rat—" He raised the shaking child to his feet and doubled up his fist again. It was a horrible weapon, one that could deal an appalling punishment.

Before he could bring it down upon his pitiful victim Margy sprang forward. Her face was white with fury; her eyes burned like black coals in the pallor of her face.

"If you strike that child again," she said, in a deadly, level tone, "I will call the police. There is a policeman not a hundred yards away."

This was pure bravado on Margy's part.

She had seen no policeman—in fact had great doubts whether there were any officers of the law in that part of the country.

Whether the ruffian was daunted by her words or her manner, it would be hard to say. At any rate, he released the boy, giving him, at the same time, a push that sent him sprawling into the dust of the road.

"Get into the fliv, you!" growled the man.

The little lad picked himself up, half-stunned as he was and nearly paralyzed with terror, and went, shaking and quivering, to the car. He pulled himself up to the step, but his progress was not swift enough. The burly man applied to him the toe of a heavy boot.

The girls cried aloud. Margy stepped forward as though she actually intended to strike the man with her small strength.

But all three of the ruffians jumped into the car.

One of them started the motor. The girls caught a glimpse of the child, crouched in a corner of the tonneau, his little pinched face staring at them with the anguish and despair of a cornered animal.

Hardly knowing what she did, Helen started running after the car. She brought up in a cloud of dust a few yards away and came shamefacedly back to her sisters.

"It seems impossible to leave that poor

child in such hands," she explained, but neither Margy nor Rose needed an explanation of her act. They shared her impotent rage.

"We shall probably miss our train," said Rose suddenly. "And that won't do any one any good."

Helen nodded, and the girls turned back to the station.

"The most cowardly, the most heartless thing I ever saw!" Margy muttered, her hands clenched still. "I wish there *had* been a policeman within call."

Rose looked at her curiously.

"You didn't see one, then?" she rather stated than asked.

Margy laughed grimly.

"No, I didn't see one. I don't suppose that threat did any good, really," she added, when they reached the platform. "It interfered with the man's brutality now, but probably a little further down the road he stopped his car and started all over again."

"Oh, don't!" Helen shuddered. Then she added with sudden energy and a heat unnatural in Helen; "He would not have dared, if Hugh had been here."

"Or Dale or Joe, or any of the rest of them," agreed Margy dryly. "However, the boys are a little too far away to help at present."

Rose looked at her sisters queerly, started to

speak, and then seemed to think better of it.

"What is it, Posie?" asked Margy, the ever-observant. "You have something on your mind."

"Well, I don't know whether you noticed it or not," Rose said slowly. "But one of those men standing by the car looked like a woman."

The others stared at Rose in amazement. Helen opened her mouth for an explanation, but the train arrived at the moment and caused her to change her mind.

It was only luck that they did not lose most of their belongings in boarding the train. For this time, their thoughts were not on candy or magazines. They were thinking of a poor, scared youngster cowering and shrinking beneath a rain of cruel blows. They were consumed with a desire for revenge upon the ruffian who had struck those blows.

And what was it Rose had said about one of the men looking like a woman?

After they had disposed of themselves and their luggage in the train they asked her about it.

"What made you think one of the men looked like a woman, Rose?" asked Margy.

"I don't know." Rose was clearly puzzled, herself. "Perhaps it was the way he stood, or his face—yes, it was his face, and the way the

hair grew away from it. His skin was whiter, too."

The girls shook their heads and could make nothing of it.

"Even if you are right, I can't see that the discovery has anything to do with that poor little lad they had with them," said Margy, resigning herself once more to the delights of the flying landscape.

"Poor little fellow," murmured Helen beneath her breath. "Poor little lad!"

Soon after that the train reached Grangeville, and in the excitement of that great event the dreadful incident was forgotten.

"There's the stage over there," said Rose, pointing to the far end of the platform. "See, it has the name 'Crag House' on it."

"Looks pretty decrepit to me," said Margy. "Wonder if it will hold us all!"

CHAPTER XI

Crag House

The vehicle that was to take the Blythe girls to Crag House was as decrepit as Margy had said. One dejected-looking horse was attached to it by harness that had been very obviously mended in more than one place. The wagon itself sagged from years and hard usage. The driver matched the outfit, being stoop-shouldered, bald of head, and watery of eye.

The more the three girls stared at this strange affair, the more dispirited they became.

"And we left home for this!" murmured Rose.

Margy gestured her to silence. She had caught the driver's eye, and that ancient was shambling toward them.

"Was you goin' to Crag House?" he asked them in a wheezy voice. "Train's late. Been waitin' here more'n an hour. This all your luggage?" pointing to their grips.

"We have some trunks somewhere around,"

said Helen, in a determinedly cheerful tone. "Can you look them up for us? Here are the checks."

She handed him the bits of pasteboard and he ambled off, his stooped shoulders protesting silently against any sort of labor whatsoever.

"He won't find them," predicted Rose. She was trying to seem as cheerful as Helen, which she found very hard to do. The corners of her mouth would droop with fatigue and disappointment.

"Don't be a joy-chaser, as your friend, Miss Dean would say," Margy said. "Crag House may be all right when we get there."

"I doubt it," Rose persisted. "Just look at the people."

Margy obeyed, and was not greatly impressed with their fellow travelers who had alighted at Grangeville and were now standing in scattered, straggling groups or piling themselves and their baggage into equipages that would take them to their chosen vacation places.

Two or three of them had already taken seats in the Crag House stage. These the girls were impressed with least of all. They were poorly dressed, and had swarthy, foreign-looking faces.

"Have we got to spend two weeks with *them?*" whispered Rose, aghast. "Girls, we

surely have let ourselves in for something this time!''

''Never give up the ship,'' said Margy, with forced lightness.

At the end of the words, as though to mark a period to them, there came a clap of thunder. It was so sudden and loud that the girls started and looked nervously skyward.

''A shower will certainly improve matters,'' remarked Rose, grinning mirthlessly. ''If the boys could only see us now!''

''I wonder if that old man is coming back before dark.'' Helen, usually so patient and long-suffering, was beginning to feel the strain of the long trip. A full view of the Crag House bus did little to improve her temper.

''Maybe the trunks didn't come on the train,'' Rose suggested.

Margy frowned.

''Why look for trouble? Haven't we enough—''

''Here he comes!'' interrupted Helen.

''And here comes the rain, too,'' observed Rose. ''It's a race! Which one wins?''

All unaware of this levity at his expense, the old man shuffled up to them.

''We got your trunks,'' he wheezed at them. ''I'll git you up to the house first before it rains and then come back for 'em.''

"It's raining now," suggested Helen. "We'd better hurry."

But the ancient was impervious to all such hints. He wandered away without giving any explanation and disappeared in the midst of a group of stragglers at the far end of the station.

"Another hundred years to wait," said Rose, her foot beating a tattoo on the platform. "I thought he was going to get us to the house before it rains."

"We'd better jump into the stage," Helen suggested. "We won't get quite so wet in there."

The girls looked ruefully at the three dark-skinned occupants of the stage, but finally decided in favor of the suggestion.

They climbed into the rear seat—this being the one farthest removed from the "foreign invasion." For five long minutes they sat there, trying to possess their souls in patience. This laudable attempt did not meet with the success it deserved.

The rain was coming down harder, the thunder rolled continuously, and the lightning was quite terrifyingly vivid.

"If he doesn't come soon, I shall walk," Rose threatened, at the end of her patience. "I didn't come to the country for the sake of sitting in a leaky stagecoach and letting the

rain drip down my back. Girls, I'm soaked."

"Luckily I brought some first aid along," said Helen, trying to laugh and shivering instead.

"We will probably catch cold and die of pneumonia, anyway," said Margy gloomily.

"If the lightning doesn't strike us first," added Rose.

A terrific clap of thunder reverberated from the mountainside, rolling and rumbling down into the valley. It set their nerves on edge, as did the vivid flash of lightning that followed.

There is no telling just what might have happened if, at that moment, their ancient driver had not chosen to return.

As he clambered in leisurely fashion into the driver's seat, Rose shook her fist at him.

"If you don't make that horse move, I'll take the reins myself," she muttered.

Margy punched her knee for silence.

"If you make him mad, he may run us down the side of the mountain."

"Probably will anyway," said Rose. However, she as well as the others, felt decidedly more cheerful now that they were actually moving. The rain still rolled down the back of their necks, but this was not so maddening in view of the fact that they might reasonably expect to reach before long shelter and a change of clothes.

The scenery was beautiful. No amount of tumbled-down stages and decrepit old men could spoil that. The road climbed continually from the station in the valley. They passed through woods so virgin in their beauty that it seemed as if they must have stood just that way since the world began.

At places the road became narrow, winding about the side of the mountain and skirting, by the narrowest margin, the precipitous descent on the farther side.

"If that horse should miss his step, it would be good-bye, girls," said Rose, though her laugh was a trifle nervous.

At that point the road dropped away sharply for some hundred feet. The view was superb and the girls longed for the brook that purled its way between rocks and bushes at the base of the slope.

"Wouldn't it be glorious to be down there," said Helen. Her eyes were half-closed and the girls knew she was visioning that same scene upon canvas—*her* canvas.

"Yes, but I reserve the right to get down there my own way," said Margy dryly. "And if our good driver doesn't beware," she added, as the contraption gave a sickening lurch, sliding perilously near the edge of the drop, "I shall be deprived of that right!"

"Say not such!" implored Rose, clinging

hopefully to the side of her seat. "I'm having all the trouble I want, right now."

"Why girls leave home!" said Margy, and her tone was so doleful they had to chuckle.

"Cheer up," consoled Rose. "Crag House will be dry, whatever else it may be."

"Don't be too sure," Margy retorted. "Such things as leaky roofs have been known to exist, my child."

"Isn't she the encouraging thing," said Rose plaintively. "Are you quite sure, Nell," turning to the older girl, "that you brought that first aid kit along?"

They reached their destination at last, after a seemingly endless jogging over muddy roads. The first sight of Crag House seemed to justify the girls' gravest fears.

Whereas the name of this summer haven had suggested an airy, picturesque structure poised on the edge of a craggy cliff, the reality suggested nothing so much as a tumbled-down shanty.

"I bet the roof leaks!" groaned Rose. "Oh, girls, let's go home!"

At that moment they would have done so willingly. Only the pressing need for food and dry raiment prevented their directing the ancient driver back along the route they had come.

Crag House was gray indeed, and sagging

from age and lack of paint. Its shutters, for the most part, seemed permanently disabled, some hanging from the casements by one disconsolate hinge.

The house was built in typical farmhouse style—long and low with various unsightly wings and ells projecting here and there from the body of it, while in the rear could be seen the outhouses and barns. These, like the house, were badly in need of repair.

Along the front of this structure ran a porch, if such it could be called. It was only one step up from the ground. Here and there one of the rough boards that had made the flooring had disappeared from sight. A sleep walker would have broken his neck there on his very first nocturnal trip.

Of course the girls could not get the full benefit of this at first sight. But they saw enough to assure them that Crag House was no place for them.

"I wonder," said Margy grimly, "what is the next train back!"

CHAPTER XII

Disappointment

The Blythe girls alighted from the ancient hack, cold, weary and disheartened. The first sight of Crag House would have been dispiriting enough, in the full and cheerful light of the sun.

But seen thus, in the midst of a thunder storm, with the lightning flashing and the thunder reverberating as it does only in the mountains, Crag House was little short of appalling.

The girls, with their three fellow travelers in the hack, went up on the porch. The sound of the stage being turned around caused Helen to look over her shoulder.

"The driver is going back for our trunks," she said. "We might better tell him to leave them at the station," ruefully.

Helen's smooth forehead was furrowed. For Helen was worried—more anxious and uneasy than she would have cared to have her two sisters know.

Hers was the responsibility, after all, though

the girls were so little younger than herself. And Crag House was not at all the sort of place she cared to take them to.

The worst part of it was, there seemed no way of escape, for that night, at least. They must make the best of a bad bargain until morning, when they could better decide what to do. Anyway, the place might not be quite so bad inside.

Vain hope!

The interior of Crag House had been correctly foretold by its exterior. Everything was gray, dirty, tumbled-down, sordid.

A slatternly woman met them in the hall. She glanced sharply at the girls and then exchanged some words with their three traveling companions. This conversation was incomprehensible to them, since it was carried on in a foreign tongue.

"Sounds like Italian," whispered Rose. "What do you know about that!"

Helen nodded and pressed her hand.

"Be careful what you say," she whispered back. "Let me do the talking."

"Gladly," said Rose, shivering. "As long as you don't talk too much!"

However, the conference between Helen and the untidy woman of Crag House was short and to the point.

Helen explained who they were. The woman

nodded, at the same time calling sharply to a barefoot child who stood in the doorway.

"Show these people their room, Lina," she directed. "Second floor, right."

Without saying anything more she turned and abruptly left them.

The girls followed the barefoot Lina up the narrow and dirty stairs to the second floor. Here they turned down a short passage and the child paused before a door.

"Here you are," she said, swinging it wide. "Supper's soon."

She stared at them curiously for another second. Then, as they entered the room, turned and pattered down the hall.

The girls gave one glance at their new surroundings, then turned and looked at each other in eloquent silence.

The room contained one large iron bed. The springs sagged, the covers on the bed, the pillow slips, even the counterpane, looked gray, as though they had never been thoroughly washed.

There was an iron cot near one of the windows, and this looked less inviting than the bed, if such a thing were possible. Besides these pieces of furniture, there was a washstand with a mirror above it, cracked in such a way as to distort hopelessly the features of

any one who possessed the temerity to face himself in it.

There was a broken pitcher set in a small bowl that would hold about a cupful of water, two chairs, and a battered oak dresser.

Moreover, the room was stifling. The roof slanted and the windows under the eaves were small.

"If a breeze should happen to stray this way," said Rose, remarking the windows, "it would never get higher than our feet."

"Something, to have cool feet, anyway," from Margy.

"Cool!" snorted Rose. "Mine are so cold already they will never get warm again. Girls," she faced them tragically, "how are we going to stand this place?"

"We aren't!" said Helen quietly. She had been making a thorough tour of the room and what she found out did nothing to lessen her determination to leave Crag House at the first possible minute. "We will have to stay to-night. But to-morrow we'll find another place."

"But how? Where?" asked Rose helplessly.

Helen shook her head and pointed to the grips.

"I haven't the slightest idea," she said. "But what I do know is that we shall all catch

our death of cold if we don't get into some dry clothing."

Luckily they had brought a complete change with them in their grips. They were wise enough to know that one could never count upon the prompt arrival of a trunk when traveling.

It was some comfort to exchange their sodden clothes for dry, warm ones. When they had washed hands and faces in the absurdly small bowl, they felt refreshed both physically and mentally.

"Now to run a comb through my awful hair," said Rose, diving again into her grip for a comb. "I declare, I don't see how it got so tangled when I wore my hat almost all the way. Oh, bother, where did I put that comb?"

"Here, hon," Margy said, retrieving the missing article from the floor where Rose had brushed it in her hurry. "I almost stepped on it. My goodness—" pausing to listen, "can that be the dinner bell?"

"It can and it am," said Rose, almost lightheartedly. The thought of food had an immensely cheering effect. "Starved to death is what I am. Helen," twisting herself about and vainly trying to look down the small of her back over one shoulder, "I think my sash is wrong. Fix it for me—that's a dear. Oh, Nell, *don't* you look sweet!"

Helen had put on a flowered voile that she had made at home in one afternoon's work. She had brushed her fair hair smoothly from her forehead, and there was a flush in her creamy skin that would have put a peach to shame. Helen was one of those rare persons who can look wholesome and beautiful at the same time.

Now she put an arm about her youngest sister in a swift hug.

"You're a flatterer, Rosebud," she said. "Such compliments make me blush!"

They were in almost a merry mood when they went down the narrow, unpleasant-smelling hall toward the stairs that led to the first floor. An aroma floated upward from the kitchen, and to their famished senses it seemed very savory and inviting.

But their first glimpse of the dining room was sufficient to summon all their former depression.

It was a long, narrow apartment, with two tables stretching the length of it. The cloths on them might once have been white, but they certainly boasted that distinction no longer. Like the bed linen in the room above, they looked as though they had never known a thorough laundering. Also, as the girls advanced still further into the room, it became quite evi-

dent that these same cloths had not been changed for a considerable period.

At the end of the tables, to which the cloths did not quite reach, newspapers with hideous advertisements protruded.

"Newspapers, used as a silence cloth," murmured Helen, the perfect housekeeper. "I never in my life even heard of such a thing!"

The slatternly woman who had greeted them in the hall led them to three seats at the far end of the room.

It was not until the girls sat down at the table that they discovered the room was full of flies. Flies hovered over the slices of ham on the cracked platter. Flies, black above the sugar bowl and making a leisurely meal of the bread.

"Oh, I can't stand this—it makes me sick!"

In her disgust, Rose spoke in a louder tone than she had intended. The man at her right, an unpleasant-looking individual with a large, red face and small, peering eyes, turned and leered at her suspiciously.

"Better be careful what you say here," Helen warned in a low tone. "It won't do to make enemies."

"But I can't eat such food," Rose persisted, though this time her voice was carefully lowered. "It would choke me."

"Act as though you were eating anyway,"

Helen advised, helping herself to a slice of the ham and a soggy potato. "That woman is watching us."

Margy lifted a glass of milk to her lip, sputtered, choked and set it down hastily. Her face was red and a study of conflicting emotions.

"Sour!" she said in an undertone.

That meal was a nightmare. How the girls ever got through with it, making a pretense of eating with enjoyment, they were never able to tell.

The table was waited on by the small barefoot girl named Lina and an older boy, also barefoot. The latter was a sullen youth with shifty eyes and a perpetual scowl.

His face brightened at sight of the pretty girls, however, and he leered at them in open admiration.

A wave of wrath swept Helen. She had an almost uncontrollable impulse to throw the cracked meat platter at him, slabs of ham, and all!

When the ordeal was finally over—dessert was a baked apple, half done and swimming in sour cream—they went directly to their room.

After shutting the door and carefully shooting an ineffectual-looking bolt, they faced each other in speechless dismay.

"Girls, I never thought there could be a

place like this!" It was Helen who first found her voice. "We must leave the first thing in the morning."

"Provided we are not all murdered in our beds to-night." Rose spoke nervously.

"Margy—Rose—come here!" Helen had wandered over to the window. She was suddenly tense, pointing excitedly to the road below. "That red car! Do you recognize it?"

CHAPTER XIII

The Red Car

The girls had to bend down in order to gain a clear view of the road beneath the windows.

For a moment, Helen's exclamation puzzled them. They could see a car, but at first glance it did not seem familiar. The storm clouds that obscured the sun, threw a greenish haze over everything, confusing vision.

Rose was the first to catch Helen's meaning.

"The red car!" she said excitedly. "The one that was at the junction! You're right, Nell; it is!"

"The red car at the junction?" repeated Margy, still puzzled.

Rose turned to her impatiently.

"Surely you remember the man who abused that poor youngster!" she said. "And the other one who stood by the car and the one who looked like a woman?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" exclaimed Margy, with quick interest. "Well, now what do you suppose those people are doing here?"

"No good, I'll be bound," said Rose darkly.

"This is just the sort of place you might expect to find them," said Helen. Her uneasiness was rapidly increasing to genuine alarm. Whereas, up to this time, she had looked forward to a night in this objectionable place merely with distaste, she now experienced trepidation.

Those three men at the junction were not only coarse and low—they were vicious, as well. Any one who could mistreat a child so brutally was capable of almost any crime.

And now here was this car, parked before the doorway of the very house in which she and her sisters were forced to spend the night! The owners of the car were probably at this moment downstairs, conversing with the slatternly woman and the shifty-eyed proprietor whom they had so far only glimpsed at a distance.

Helen found that she was shivering with excitement and fear.

"I wonder if they have that poor little child with them," mused Margy, her eyes still on the battered red car in the road. "Every time I think of him, I feel a sort of red rage coming over me. If I should see him abused again, there's no telling what I'd do."

"I can't imagine what they're doing here," Rose persisted.

"The same as we are, maybe," remarked

Margy dryly. "Probably they have come to spend their vacation."

"A fine vacation we have had so far!" said Rose. She sat down on the edge of the sagging bed and fanned herself with a tiny handkerchief. "I want my money back!"

The girls managed to get through the rest of that incredibly long afternoon and even mustered courage enough to go downstairs again in response to the summons of the supper bell.

"I never was so hungry in my life," said Rose plaintively. "And I know I shan't be able to eat a thing."

They were fearful of meeting the occupants of the red motor car at supper. But they were still more afraid to stay away from the meal, since they felt that such an act almost certainly would draw attention and perhaps suspicion to them.

Through the nightmare of dinner earlier in the day, they had been aware of an unfriendly atmosphere. It was as though not only the proprietors of Crag House, but their queerly assorted guests as well, felt that the girls were not suited to the place nor the people in it, and were suspicious of them accordingly.

This being the case, the girls felt that they must be doubly careful to avoid any further ill-

feeling. They were alone in that remote, deserted spot, and utterly helpless.

They found with relief that one of their fears was groundless. The owners of the red car were nowhere visible.

"Though they must be somewhere about," Rose whispered guardedly, as they found their places at the long table. "Unless, they have forgot and left their car behind them."

Supper was even more discouraging than the dinner had been. The storm was over and the sun trying feebly to shine, awakening the flies to redoubled energy.

"If the hash wasn't so greasy and the bread so doughy and the tea like lukewarm dishwater," Margy explained afterward, "we might have had a decent meal."

"Well, I know one thing," Rose said. "If this keeps up, I will soon be as thin as a fence rail. My clothes are already beginning to hang loosely on me."

One storm had followed another, with short, intermittent periods of brightening, until now, at six o'clock, the rain had settled to a steady downpour that bid fair to last the rest of the night.

"And still the red car stands out, regardless of wind and weather," murmured Rose. "Wouldn't you think they'd put it in one of the barns, if they haven't a garage?"

"Nothing," said Margy, with decision, "could possibly make that car any worse than it is!"

After a while, for lack of anything more exciting to do and because they were really dead tired after their trip, the girls decided to go to bed.

"I never thought I'd be going to bed because I had nothing better to do," sighed Rose. "Anyway, we have the remains of that basket of fruit," she said, brightening. "And we can read a magazine after we get in bed."

"Don't be too hopeful," said Margy, studying the acetylene gas burner. "If this jet gives a light that any one could possibly read by, I am very much mistaken."

In this conjecture she proved dishearteningly correct. The burner yielded a tiny, flickering light that merely served to make darkness more visible.

"Oh, let's go to bed," cried Rose, in utter disgust. "And if any one speaks to me again, I'll bite 'em!"

But after they were in bed, it was impossible for them to sleep, exhausted as they were. The bed was more uncomfortable than it looked, and nothing worse could possibly be said of it. Add to that the ceaseless beating of the rain on the roof over their heads, the stuffy room and the perpetual, mournful plaint of a

whippoorwill somewhere off in the woods, and one can readily understand the reason for their restlessness.

Despite her common sense, Helen found herself listening for footsteps in the hall outside their doors; half expected to hear the knob turn stealthily.

She lay on the outside of the bed, staring across the dark room toward the door. The longer she stared the more wide awake she became until finally inaction became unendurable.

She rose quietly and drew a dressing robe over her nightgown.

Margy and Rose had been so quiet that she thought them asleep. But as she moved, a shadow detached itself from the deeper shadows.

"Who's that?" she cried quickly.

"Oh, Nell, you frightened me!" It was Rose standing before her. "Is anything the matter? Has anything happened?"

"Nothing, except that I can't go to sleep," said Helen, trying to speak reassuringly. "I thought I might sit by the window for a while and see if I couldn't snare some unsuspecting breeze."

"That same thought was in my mind," admitted Rose. "I never was in such a stuffy hole as this in my life."

"I wish you would stop chattering," Margy

broke in fretfully. "And make that whip-poorwill keep still! How do you think a fellow can get to sleep?"

"Sh—Margy! Keep quiet! There's some one right beneath the window!"

There came a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a low rumble of thunder.

"Another storm," said Margy resignedly. "Now I know I will never be able to get to sleep."

"Margy, will you stop talking?" This time the command was so earnest that Margy obeyed it. She even got quietly out of bed and went to join the girls by the window.

Rose raised a hand to enjoin silence.

"It's one of the men who belong to the red auto," she whispered excitedly. "Listen! Don't you recognize his voice?"

The girls listened, and though the tones of the man were partly drowned by the grumbling of the thunder, they felt certain that they recognized the voice.

"He's the one who beat the little fellow," said Margy grimly. "Wouldn't I like to get my hands on him!"

"They're going away now, girls," said Rose. "Look!"

The purring of a motor mingled with the growling of the thunder. At the moment a bright flash of lightning revealed the red car

as plainly as though a spot light had been suddenly thrown upon it. It moved down the road to the accompaniment of a coughing and sputtering motor and the shrill grinding of unoiled brakes.

A second flash of lightning revealed the empty road. The red car and its mysterious occupants had gone.

CHAPTER XIV

An Unpleasant Situation

For a long time the Blythe girls sat by the window, staring into the darkness. The silence and remoteness of that lonely countryside was fearful, yet fascinating, and not even the very real danger of the lightning was sufficient to drive them from the open window.

After a while the wind shifted and a fresh, rain-sweetened breeze blew through the window and the girls reveled in it gratefully.

"I hope those men in the red car get good and wet," said Rose.

"That's a pretty safe bet," Margy remarked slangily. "I wonder if they took the little lad along with them," she added.

"Probably," Helen sighed. "I wish we could have thought of some way of helping the poor little fellow," she said. "But it wasn't possible, and I suppose it won't do us a bit of good to think about it."

"No, we have troubles enough of our own," Rose agreed ruefully. "And *this* is our vacation! Come on, let's go back to bed!"

They followed this suggestion reluctantly and because it was not reasonable to expect they would be able to sit up all night. But they returned to the lumpy, uncomfortable beds uneasily, fully convinced that they would not be able to sleep a wink that night.

However, they did sleep, and it was about two o'clock in the morning when Rose was suddenly startled awake by voices just outside their door.

She lay motionless, frozen to a sort of numb terror. She wondered if Helen and Margy were awake. She felt that, if they were not, she would die of fright.

Those in the hall were men, two of them, judging from their whispered conversation. They spoke so softly that Rose could not hear what was said.

But she did hear, very distinctly, the stealthy turning of the door knob, the slight creaking of the door as it settled against the almost worthless bolt!

Rose sat upright in bed, determined to spring to her feet and call for help should the bolt give. It held, however, and after a moment there was the slight rattle of the door knob as though a hand had been snatched quickly from it.

"You fool!" a voice hissed. "You'll wake them up. Wait till to-morrow. They're sure

to go out then and leave the way clear to us."

So the motive was robbery!

Rose sat very still in bed while the noise of stealthy, retreating footsteps faded off down the hall. Only then did she venture to slip out of bed and pad in her bare feet over to the door.

Very gently she drew the bolt. This done, she leaned against the frame of the door for a moment to still the frantic beating of her heart; then quickly flung the door wide.

Nothing but darkness—a great well of it—outside the door.

Sudden panic seized the girl, and she flung the door to again, not gently this time, but with a slam that sounded as loud as a pistol shot in the stillness of the house.

With quivering fingers she felt for the bolt, found it, shot it home.

"Rose, for goodness' sake, what are you doing?" came in Margy's voice.

Then Helen was beside her, fingers icy cold upon the arm of the younger girl.

"Rose, dearest, what is it? Oh, tell me quickly! Are you hurt?"

"No." Rose pushed her sister down upon the bed; pressed cold fingers over her mouth.

"Please, please, don't say anything," she begged. "I'll tell you everything in a moment. Only listen!"

Their hearts pounding in the intense stillness, the sisters held their breath to listen. Not a sound to break the quiet!

For several seconds they remained motionless. Then Rose sank down on the bed beside Helen. She clung to the older girl and whispered in broken phrases the details of her terrifying experience.

When she had finished, even Margy was shaken out of her usual calm.

"We must get out of this place as soon as we possibly can," she said in a whisper. "It must be a nest of thieves and robbers."

After a while, as Rose tried to find her way back to the cot by the window, she stumbled over one of the trunks. It and its mate had been brought up by the bald-headed driver of the decrepit hack while the girls had been at supper.

Rose held on to her stubbed toe till the worst of the agony had passed. Then she said, suddenly:

"Perhaps the awful woman downstairs won't let us go. She may make us stay the full two weeks since we engaged the room for that time."

"Hm!" said Margy belligerently, "I'd like to see her try to make us!"

"But they have our trunks here," said

Helen. "Rose is right, Margy. Suppose she refuses to let us take our baggage away?"

"Good gracious, she could do that, couldn't she?" agreed Margy.

There fell a silence between the sisters as they thought over this new angle to their problem. They felt very helpless, and, at the moment, utterly in the power of the sour-faced woman and the shifty-eyed man who ran the place. Helen was thinking:

"If Hugh were only here! He'd soon fix things!"

Rose's thoughts were almost identical except for the name of the "fixer," who, in her case, was Joe Morris.

It is characteristic of Margy that she thought of neither Dale nor Lloyd in her unpleasant musings. She was too busy wondering what she, herself, could do to get her sisters out of this dilemma.

Naturally the girls slept little for the remainder of that night. Cat naps and exhausted dozes from which they woke, wide-eyed and startled, were all they secured.

They were tremendously relieved when the first gray light of approaching day crept in at the windows, bringing out in shadowy relief the shabby furnishings of the room.

They were up with the sun, despite the dreadful night. Yawning, weary-eyed, they

found their clothes and got into them, someway.

The distorting mirror over the washstand made them look so hideous that they spent as little time as possible before it.

"I can fix my hair by feel, anyway," said Margy, as she finally turned her back upon the glass.

"And if I stare in that mirror another minute, I'll hate me for life," declared Rose. "You be my mirror, Nell dearest, and tell me if I look right."

Helen looked at her youngest sister critically and smoothed the blond curls into a still more glistening smoothness.

"You always look sweet, Rosebud. And, now, suppose we go downstairs and see if there is any sign of breakfast."

"Too early yet, probably," said Margy. "But we might take a little walk and see something of the country, anyway."

"Reckon the woods will be damp after all the thunder showers we had yesterday," said Rose. She pressed out a wrinkle in her pretty dress and thoughtfully regarded the, as yet, unopened trunks. "I suppose our clothes will be a mess if we don't unpack them pretty soon."

"Hardly sensible to do it now," said Margy

dryly, "when we are leaving directly after breakfast."

"What an optimist she is," said Helen, as she slipped the bolt and opened the door into the hall. "If we leave with our trunks within a week, I imagine we shall be very lucky."

"Gracious, in a week, I will be skins and bones," moaned Rose. "Nell, you are cruel!"

But Helen's prophecy proved dishearteningly correct. After a breakfast, so unappetizing and so poorly served that they could scarcely touch it, they went in search of the proprietor, he of the shifty eyes and unpleasant appearance. They all went together, believing hopefully that in union there might be strength.

After a few words with the proprietor, however, they realized how exceedingly vain such a hope had been.

At their first words he began to object. This objection was so violent and audible that it drew a crowd outside the shabby office.

The miserable, slatternly woman, his wife, pushed her way through this crowd and belligerently confronted the girls.

"You can't go before the week is up," she told them, her little, red-rimmed eyes ugly. "And you will pay full board, too."

"Suppose we refuse?" said Margy, in a pleasant voice. "What will you do then?"

"YOU CAN'T GO BEFORE THE WEEK IS UP," SHE TOLD THEM.
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"Let you go, and good riddance," said this unattractive person, leering at her. "But your trunks stay here."

Helen made an imperative motion to Margy to say nothing further at the moment. There was no use antagonizing these people any more than necessary. And she did not trust Margy's quick tongue.

"If we pay you the full week's board you will have no objections to our going, I suppose?" she said, as mildly as she could.

The woman looked at her contemptuously and half turned away.

"You can go where you please, for all I care," she said. "Only, I will want to see the color of the money first."

This insult was almost too much for Margy. Her face flushed and she started forward, but Helen seized her by the arm and hurried her out of the room.

"Don't say anything, now," she whispered fiercely. "Wait until I have a chance to think."

soft wet earth wafted to them from the woods, a delicious fragrance.

The girls drew in deep breaths of it and began to smile.

"After all," said Rose, "they can't spoil the country for us."

"Unless they starve us to death," rejoined Margy ruefully. "No doubt there are roots and berries in the woods—if we could tell the edible ones from the poisonous."

"Maybe we could walk to the village and get some crackers or something," said Rose longingly.

Helen shrugged resignedly.

"If we are going to buy our meals outside, besides paying for our board at the house," she said, "we might just as well give the woman a week's money and be done with it."

"Maybe she wouldn't let us go even then," suggested Rose. "I don't mind telling you," with a shudder, "that I believe there are very few things that the proprietors of Crag House would hesitate to do, if they felt like doing it!"

"I wish I knew who it was that turned the handle of our door last night," said Margy grimly. "It would give me great pleasure to tell that gentleman what I thought of him—before we leave."

"Good gracious!" Rose put a hand to her throat and her face went white. "We should

never have left that room to-day! We must be crazy!"

"What does the child mean?"

Rose answered impatiently.

"You forget the whisper I heard last night," she said, her own voice sinking to a whisper. "When the man in the hall told his pal to wait until we went out this morning to do—whatever they were going to do!"

Margy made a scornful gesture, but Helen looked perturbed.

"We had better go back at once!" she cried.

"What would they find to steal?" argued Margy, as they turned back toward Crag House. "The trunks are locked and we are sporting no diamonds."

"They could break open the trunks, I suppose," Rose flared at her.

Margy gave vent to a grim chuckle.

"Even then, they would find little!"

But in her heart, she, also, was disturbed. Their experience had been unpleasant enough to wear on the strongest nerves. Besides, by this time they were actually hungry, and this physical discomfort reacted depressingly on their spirits. Every trouble seems immensely magnified when one is hungry.

But as they lessened the distance between them and Crag House, their footsteps dragged. They felt a strong reluctance to crossing that

threshold again. The fact that their mysterious visitor of the night before might even then be prowling about their room searching for hidden valuables, did not add to their eagerness.

"Serves us right for trying to look like millionairesses on a working girl's salary," said Rose, with a brave attempt at flippancy. "If we had been dressed like those people up at the house they would probably not even have noticed."

"Never!" said Margy. "I'd rather be robbed!"

"Oh, I'm almost afraid to go near that house!"

As the tumbled-down structure came in view, Rose paused and looked at the older girls appealingly.

"I have a feeling that if we go into that house again something terrible will happen to us."

"Nonsense!" snapped Margy. She was annoyed with herself because, in her heart, she felt the same as Rose. "We are modern girls and we certainly ought to be able to care for ourselves."

The sharp tooting of a motor horn behind them made them start and jump to the side of the road. A motor truck was bowling along toward them at rather a reckless pace, con-

sidering the character of the mountain road.

The girls watched it with interest. Then suddenly Rose gave a joyful cry.

"Girls, it can't be—it's impossible—but it is!"

She danced out into the middle of the road and Margy had to pull her back to safety.

"If that isn't Joe on the driver's seat my name isn't Rose Blythe, and never was!"

CHAPTER XVI

A Villain Fooled

Rose's sisters were startled, incredulous, inclined to believe that uneasiness and worry had turned the younger girl's mind.

Joe Morris! Impossible that he could be up in this remote place just at the time when they most needed his help and advice!

Impossible—but a fact nevertheless.

As the great truck slowed to a standstill beside them, Joe himself jumped from beside the driver at the imminent risk of life and limb. He came toward them, hands outstretched, face beaming.

"I'm just dreaming this," he shouted joyfully. "Pinch me, somebody, and see if I wake up!"

Rose reached out thumb and forefinger as though to carry out this request literally. Joe caught her hands in his and laughingly held them.

"All right," he said. "I can see that you are real enough. But, I say, girls, this is great!"

"Joe, you aren't half as glad to see us as we are to see you!"

Helen spoke so fervently that Joe looked at her in surprise. Surprise speedily changed to alarm as he noted how haggard their faces were and how deep the shadows beneath their eyes.

"What's happened?" he said, his voice edged with alarm. "You don't look as if your vacation had agreed with you, thus far!"

Thereupon they seized him by the arm, drew him to the side of the road, and into his sympathetic ear poured the tale of their woes.

Before they had half finished Joe was prepared, in his own parlance, "to clean up Crag House and every crag in the vicinity."

It was with difficulty that the girls were able to restrain him long enough to finish their story.

"Mighty lucky I came along," he commented grimly. "Wait till I tell my buddy here," indicating the driver of the truck who had remained, a silent but interested spectator of the scene, "what the row is all about. Then I'll go up with you to the house."

Joe held a low-toned conversation with the driver. The latter nodded understandingly several times and finally tapped his right hip pocket in a suggestive manner.

"No gun play," they heard Joe say. "I'll

leave my own little toy with you. It's better to go unarmed so as not to give these people a shadow of an excuse to use their own weapons."

The girls saw Joe take the weapon from his pocket and hand it to the other man. They shivered at sight of the dark, sinister looking bit of death-dealing steel.

"I wish Joe didn't have to carry that thing," Rose said, half to herself. "Suppose it should go off!"

"Probably it will—at the right time and place," said Margy.

Joe returned and the girls saw that the driver was backing the truck a short distance down a narrow woods road, so that it might be off the main road.

"Sure you won't need any help?" yelled the latter, waving to Joe.

The young fellow grinned and shook his head.

"Leave it to old Joe," he said. "In five minutes have the old boat in front of yonder shoddy mansion," with a scornful wave of his hand toward Crag House. "I promise to be all ready for the getaway."

"But what are your plans, Joe? What are you going to do?" demanded Rose, as they started at a brisk walk toward the house.

"I'm going to walk up, bold as you please,

and demand your luggage, young damsels in distress," said Joe, with a grin.

"And if they try to put up a scrap, they'll get a swell one, take it from me. Look here!" He drew back his coat and disclosed to their amazed vision a gleaming silver star—at least, in the sun it looked like silver.

"Joe Morris!" exclaimed Rose. "Since when did you turn sheriff?"

"It's just a fake," Joe grinned. "A thing I picked up somewhere as a kid. I've shared many a joke with that little piece of tin, believe me!"

The girls giggled. For the first time since they had arrived at Crag House they were beginning to enjoy themselves!

"Won't we have fun?" cried Rose.

She could say no more, for they had reached the steps of the porch. Joe said, in a low voice:

"Leave it to me. I'll do all the talking."

The girls were only too glad to let him have his way. They nodded and, with him, stepped inside the odorous hallway. They started for the stairs, but half-way there the woman appeared in the doorway of the dining room. She eyed them with extreme suspicion.

Joe paid her no attention whatever. He started calmly up the stairs, and the girls, taking his cue, followed him.

The woman seemed about to say something,

but checked herself. She stood still for a moment, watching them. Then, just as they reached the bend in the stairs, the girls saw her turn and quickly disappear within the room.

"She has gone for help," whispered Helen nervously. "Oh, I am so afraid there will be trouble."

"That's just what I'm looking for," chuckled Joe. "Which room is yours?"

The girls led him quickly to the room where they had spent their memorable night. Strange how assured they felt, now that Joe was with them!

The moment Margy flung open the door she saw that the room had been entered. The contents of their grips were flung about and one of the trunks had been pulled into the center of the room.

"I am positive that trunk was never there last night," said Rose excitedly.

"Hm! So some one has been busy here!" Joe was bending over the trunk, examining it. "Tried to pry the lock off. Just about time I came—or some other boy that prides himself on a strong arm. All right, girls!" He straightened up and looked at them, his eye determined. "How long will it take you to pack?"

"About two minutes!" they cried together,

and immediately set about making good their boast. It really took them five minutes, but Joe seemed satisfied.

"Now I'll take these things downstairs," the young fellow said, lifting the grips, "and beard the lion and his mate in their den. Lead on, damsels."

They all went out of the room and down the hall together, Joe coming last with the hand luggage. Every time the girls thought of the tin badge on Joe's coat, they wanted to laugh. Even then, however, they knew that they were in anything but a laughable situation.

At the foot of the stairs they found both the man and his wife waiting for them. Joe gave a quick glance through the door and saw that the truck had been driven up before the house.

"What are you doing?" demanded the shifty-eyed man, coming forward threateningly. "You can't take those things away from here!"

"I can't?" returned Joe, stopping on the last step and calmly looking the man up and down. "Who says so?"

"You hear me!" the fellow growled, coming a step closer. "Drop 'em—before I make you!"

"You, and who else?" drawled Joe. "You'd better be careful how you go threatening an officer of the law, my man."

The words had a peculiar effect upon the belligerent rascal. As a balloon loses its buoyancy at the prick of a pin, so the shifty-eyed one seemed to shrivel up.

He made one effort to recover himself. He took a step forward, his voice raised a pitch.

"You, an officer of the law?" he sneered.

Joe, quick as thought, swung the grip that he held in his right hand over to the left. Then, with an experienced and careless gesture, he flipped open the lapel of his coat.

The tin star gleamed bravely, convincingly.

"Have your men bring down these young ladies' trunks immediately," Joe directed, in the unmistakable tone of authority. "Any delay may cost you dear, my man."

The man shrank back, rubbed his hands in palpable dismay. A glance passed between him and his slatternly helpmate. Then he turned and shambled hurriedly toward the rear of the house.

"But we ought to pay for the one night here," said Helen nervously.

"You won't pay for anything," said Joe decidedly. "These crooks are getting off easy. We ought to notify the authorities and have their place raided. Ah, here they come."

He referred this time to the trunks, which were being borne down the stairs by a couple

of men who looked as if they themselves might just have escaped from prison.

They eyed Joe with suspicion, yet with a certain deference, as they set the trunks on the rickety porch. Jim, the driver of the truck, jumped down from his seat. In but a moment one trunk was loaded on the truck. Then the other one.

"Jump aboard, girls!" commanded Joe. "We're off!"

He threw the valises aboard and helped the girls up.

"You can sit on the trunks," he remarked, grinning cheerfully. "Now, Jim, drive!"

The truck turned about in the narrow road, skidding perilously on its two rear wheels, and, with a triumphant roar of the exhaust, leapt forward, rocking and jolting and all but throwing the girls out on the road.

A group had gathered on the porch of Crag House. One of the men shook his fist at the departing truck.

"Fine sheriff, you are!" he yelled.

From his seat up in front, Joe chuckled.

"They're on to us, but just a little too late!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Escape

When several miles had been put between the truck and Crag House, Joe ordered the driver to turn down a side road and stop at a spot almost invisible from the main highway.

There Joe swung himself to the ground and ran around to see if the girls were still aboard.

He found them jolted and shaken up, but in the best of spirits.

"Talk about a rough ride!" giggled Rose, as she refused Joe's offer of assistance and sprang to the road beside him. "That was pretty near the joltiest journey I ever took. If there's anything left of me, it's just luck—that's all."

"Joe Morris, your friend up front is some driver," Margy added, landing beside the other two in the road. "If there was such a thing as a policeman in this neck of the wood, you would certainly have been arrested for speeding long since."

"We've got a sheriff, anyway," giggled Rose, and Joe rather ostentatiously pulled

back the flap of his coat to reveal the silver star.

"Come on down, Helen," he called to the older girl. "You might as well stretch your legs too."

"I don't believe I have any," the girl answered, standing up gingerly. "They've done gone and left me!"

However, Joe succeeded finally in persuading her that she could still walk. Joe introduced Jim, the driver, with droll ceremony and then asked the girls what their plans were.

"We haven't one feeble little plan," Rose confessed. "The best we can think of is to have you take us to the nearest railway station and go back home."

"Go back home!" repeated Joe incredulously. "Say, that would be a swell way to spend a vacation, wouldn't it? Nothing stirring! Even I, poor worm that I am, can dope up something better than that."

"Well, we're open to conviction," Margy said encouragingly. "What's the big idea, Joe?"

"Listen, girls!" said Joe. "Peach Farm—that place Margy was so crazy about—you remember—"

"Of course we remember," Rose interrupted impatiently. "What of it?"

"As I was about to say," Joe favored her

with a cold glance, "this place with the juicy name is only a few miles further on."

"From here?" questioned Helen incredulously.

"From here," Joe affirmed gravely. "Jim and I have got to deliver this load of goods at a place just a little farther along the line. That's how we came to know about Peach Farm. We got into a row with a gang of would-be bandits down the road last night," he added casually. "It took us so long to convince them that they had tracked the wrong game, we were obliged to travel all night to make up for the delay. That's why we happened to run across you girls so early in the morning—which, I'll tell the world, was a stroke of luck."

"Joe!" Rose had come close to him, her eyes wide with fright. "You mean that your truck, that you—were attacked?"

"Sure," answered Joe cheerfully. "But you've got to expect that. It's part of the day's work."

"And you haven't had any sleep all night," said Helen sympathetically. "I should think you would both be worn out."

"We are," admitted Jim cheerfully. He was a nice lad with a tanned, good-natured face and a genial grin. "And after we get this load

safely delivered, we're in for a good long sleep. How about it, Joe?"

"You're on!" replied the latter, grinning.

"I'm afraid your encounter with the people at Crag House hasn't done you any good," said Helen anxiously. "Suppose some of those rough-looking men should try to follow you, Joe?"

Rose looked about her uneasily and involuntarily reached out a hand to touch Joe on the arm. She hated to think of him in such a dangerous business. She was quite sure she would not really have an easy minute until he found some other position.

However, they were all discussing the happy chance that had brought them so close to Peach Farm. Helen urged that they get there as soon as possible.

"It may not be any better than Crag House."

"But it certainly can't be worse," said Margy.

Joe grinned.

"That's a pretty safe bet," he said. "Well, since it seems to be unanimous that we turn our footsteps toward this place of the juicy name, suppose we travel?"

The girls were enthusiastic over this suggestion and they were soon out on the main road

again, bumping and jolting along as recklessly and merrily as ever.

The girls soon found that Joe was right about the nearness of Peach Farm. It seemed to them that they had covered but a very short distance when a farmhouse came in view that Joe said was their destination.

"Looks a little different from Crag House, doesn't it?" he shouted to them.

The spirits of the girls rose skyward as they saw how very, very different it really was. An old farmhouse set well back from the road. The house itself was gleaming with fresh white paint and the shutters were a bright green.

Before the house were the peach orchards for which it was named. One had to ride through a veritable forest of peach trees to reach it.

Back of the house, the ground was hilly and thickly wooded.

"It's heaven," sighed Helen. "I ought to be able to find plenty of material for a picture up in those woods."

"And she can think of art at a moment like this!" exclaimed Margy, the practical. "Just now, a good, juicy beefsteak would sound better to me, than all the pictures in the world."

"Oh, boy!" cried Rose longingly, "just lead me to one!"

Several guests were on the rambling, rose-

screened porch of the house when the truck drew up to it. They looked so comfortable and cozy and well-fed that Rose sighed anew.

"I believe she *does* feed them beefsteak," she confided to her sisters.

It was necessary to speak in a whisper, for they had reached the porch of the house by this time. One of the ladies had abandoned her comfortable rocking chair on the porch and disappeared within the house, presumably to summon the proprietor.

The latter appeared immediately and at sight of her plump, neat person, the girls could have embraced her with a will.

She smiled pleasantly and invited them inside the house.

"If she hasn't room for us, what will we do?" whispered Rose, and Helen whispered back that it would indeed be a terrible blow and one which they would find it hard to recover from.

But Mrs. Butterworth—the name by which the proprietor of Peach Farm pleasantly introduced herself—had vacant, by a lucky chance, two good-sized rooms that would be the "very thing for the young ladies." They were adjoining apartments and were convenient to a bath on the second floor.

As the girls expressed a wish to see the

rooms, she led them upstairs, leaving Joe to cool his heels in the pleasant parlor.

Mrs. Butterworth was stout and grunted a little as she led them upstairs. But the girls liked her, even for that.

And those two rooms! They almost cried with delight when they saw them. One room was large and airy with immaculate curtains at the windows. There was a big bed, so comfortable-looking and so snowy white in all its appointments that the weary girls longed to try it without further delay.

There were two comfortable rockers and a straight chair in this room, besides the big dresser and washstand.

"We have running water in the bathroom," Mrs. Butterworth explained. "But there are some occasions when it is more comfortable to wash in your own room. Now this is the second room," opening a door between. "It is a single room and small, but I think you will find it comfortable."

"Oh, dear Mrs. Butterworth, you don't know how good it looks to us!" cried Rose, impulsively. "We *are* so tired!"

Mrs. Butterworth patted the girl's hand in a pleasant fashion and remarked that she did look all "tuckered out."

The price of the two rooms was more than the sisters had expected to pay. But after

their experience at Crag House, they did not hesitate. At that moment, they were certain that nothing could drag them away from Peach Farm.

They made the main part of this decision known to Mrs. Butterworth, and she bustled below stairs to make arrangement for their entertainment.

The girls followed to tell Joe of their decision. They found him in the same rocking chair in which they had left him. His head had fallen over against the padded back of it. Joe Morris had gone to sleep.

"Poor boy, he is worse off than we are!" Helen took him by the shoulder and shook him gently.

Joe sprang to his feet, staggering drunkenly. His right hand reached automatically toward the corresponding hip pocket. When he recognized the startled girl, the fighting look faded from his eyes, to be replaced by a sheepish grin.

"Silly of me," he apologized. "I was dreaming those bandits were after us again. And when you grabbed me by the shoulder, Helen, it sort of fell right in with my dream. Sorry!"

Helen accepted the apology and Rose looked increasingly thoughtful. She was more than

ever certain that Joe had picked, or been picked for, the wrong kind of job.

But when they told the young fellow about the two delightful rooms upstairs and their decision to engage them at once, he was delighted.

"This is a regular place, all right," he said. "When Jim and I get rid of the stuff we have on board now, we'll be back this way. Perhaps some day," with a grin, "if we get a very cordial invitation, we might be induced to stay over to a chicken dinner."

"Consider yourself invited, Mr. Strainer Man," said Rose, using her own quaint name for Joe. She had dubbed him this at the time of her first acquaintance with him, when Joe had thoughtfully returned to them the family strainer which had been overlooked in the moving and left in the van. "And *do* take care of yourself," she added seriously as they followed him to the door.

Joe and Jim between them got the trunks down from the truck and two of Mrs. Butterworth's farmhands came in and took them up to the girls' new quarters.

Helen lingered below long enough to arrange a few details with Mrs. Butterworth. Then, after waving a last good-bye to Joe and Jim, she followed her sisters up to their rooms.

She found Margy and Rose busily engaged in unpacking the trunks.

"We want to get this done in a hurry," Margy explained, looking up at her entrance, "so we can get washed and into clean clothes before dinner."

"Mrs. Butterworth says we eat in an hour," Helen told them. "Better postpone unpacking till later. We have all afternoon, you know."

A delicious aroma of cooking floated in at the partly open door.

"Girls, I do believe that's chicken cooking!" Rose tiptoed to the door and sniffed. "It is!" she cried. "My, how can I wait?"

CHAPTER XVIII

A Glorious Day

Such a dinner as that was! The Blythe girls were ashamed of themselves for the way they ate it.

Chicken with dumplings and currant jelly. Hot biscuits, potatoes mashed to a delicious creaminess, peas fresh from the farm. And for dessert, cherry pie.

The dining room was immaculately clean. It smelled like clover with the sun on it. Mrs. Butterworth had two capped and aproned maids to wait on the tables. There were four of these, two of them long and narrow and capable of seating a number of people and two of them small, cozy affairs, tucked over by the window.

The girls were delighted to find that they had one of these tables almost to themselves. The only other occupants were a thin and pleasant-faced lady and a thin and pleasant-faced boy about ten years old, whom she introduced as her son. It seemed the lad was delicate and had been brought to the country early in accordance with his doctor's orders.

The lady had, it seemed, been coming to Peach Farm for eight years and was quite certain that she would never care to spend her summers anywhere else. Peach Farm, to her, was an absolutely ideal spot.

The girls liked their new acquaintance very much and considered themselves lucky to have been placed at her table.

The other summer guests were all middle-aged folk, the kind who prefer sitting on the piazza during the day and, for evening entertainment, play bridge and five hundred.

However, this discovery did not in the least dismay the Blythe girls. They always had good times when they were together, no matter who else might be of the party. Besides, they knew that Hugh was planning to spend a few days with them—although he had expected to see them at Crag House!—and Margy had a suspicion that either Lloyd or Dale or both might be able to spend a week end with them, anyway. Then too, had Joe not promised to stop over for at least one chicken dinner?

All this being true, the girls felt themselves delightfully independent of new acquaintances.

"We'd better ask Mrs. Butterworth if she is likely to have any spare rooms over the week end," suggested Rose, as they wandered out to the rose-covered veranda after dinner.

"It would be too bad if the boys should come up and have no place to stay."

"They could always camp out in the woods," said Margy indifferently.

After a rather lazy search for the lady in question, they finally found her in the rear of the house.

She was giving instructions for supper to a cook whose immaculate neatness brought into sharp contrast the slovenly chef at Crag House.

Mrs. Butterworth greeted them with her usual cheerful smile. In response to their questions as to whether she would have a room or two to spare over the next week end she said she would probably be able to give them one, at least, since one of her boarders expected to leave on Thursday night.

She explained also, and in a rather apologetic way, that there was a dearth of young people as yet. It seemed that most of the "young ones" came up in August.

"That's the time we'll have to take our vacation next year, then," said Helen and, thanking Mrs. Butterworth, they wandered off.

They found the environs of Peach Farm as attractive as the house itself. The farm and orchards were extensive and well kept up.

"If only this fruit was ripe enough to pick,"

said Margy, lingering beneath one of the peach trees.

"Let's go around back of the house," came from Rose. "I have a terrible hankering to see what those woods look like at close range."

It was much like any other woodland, that hilly country back of the house. But to the girls, in their exhilarated mood and with their thirst for adventure, it was little less than an enchanted forest. It seemed full of the most delightful glades and grottos and unexpected little brooks and high, flat boulders that were just made to scramble up.

The artist in Helen was thrilled. Before they had wandered far she had found a dozen exquisite scenes, any one of which would make a unique and beautiful canvas.

"To-morrow morning, early, I'll start," she said, her eyes soft with the light of inspiration. "Girls, with all this beauty around me I can't wait."

"Hold on to her, Posie, or she'll rush right back for her brush and paints, regardless of the fact that the light is getting bad and she would have to stop almost before she began," said Margy, with fond sarcasm. "Like most geniuses, she can go stark raving crazy sometimes."

"I don't know whether to be flattered or not," returned Helen, dimpling.

"Most people don't, when Margy talks to 'em," said Rose sagely.

They turned back soon after that because the shadows were getting long and they were afraid of losing their way. So far they had followed a fairly well-marked mountain trail, but they could see that, a little further on, it branched off sharply and was intersected by another path, narrower and steeper than the one they were on. They would want to be considerably more familiar with their surroundings before they would try that other path.

"But to-morrow," cried Rose joyously, "we'll come back so bright and early that even Helen can't catch us napping!"

When the three sisters reached the house they were glad to find preparations for supper under way. Marvelous, how the country air affected their appetites! Besides, they had to make up for their forced fast at Crag House.

After supper they were lazy enough to sit on the veranda for a while. The moon shone down through the trees, its silver light obscuring details of the countryside, making it unreal, fairylike.

What might not happen on such a night? so thought the girls.

Their new friend, the thin, pleasant-faced lady, whose name was Anderson, came out

after seeing her boy to bed and joined them on the porch.

Beneath the spell of the moonlight, she became confidential. Binding them to secrecy, she whispered the fact that strange things went on about the farm at night—or rather, in the woods back of the farm.

All interest, the girls asked her what things.

"Oh, queer noises," she replied. "Sometimes the sound of men's voices, raised in altercation. And some say they have heard screams coming from far off in the woods—terrible, hair-raising screams."

The girls shuddered. The night had lost something of its peaceful charm for them. Screams off in the woodland? Horrible!

Mrs. Anderson went on to say, in a more normal tone, that there seemed to be a continual stream of automobiles passing down the road in front of the house at night.

"Of course that is exaggerated," she added, with a short laugh. "There are really not so many cars, perhaps, only that they seem numerous, considering this quiet place and the time the cars are abroad. Mrs. Butterworth is uneasy. She insists that something is wrong and has even considered, I believe, communicating with the police."

The girls thought of the red car and its mysterious occupants—of the poor little boy

they had seen abused at the junction. They remembered also, their own experience at Crag House—not more than ten or twelve miles distant—the shifty-eyed man and slovenly woman. Thinking of these, they were ready to agree with Mrs. Anderson, and with Mrs. Butterworth, as well, that there might be something going on in that vicinity that would stand police investigation.

They talked about it when they went up to their cool, airy rooms that night, so unlike the one at Crag House. It seemed that they were not to forget their unpleasant experiences there as soon and completely as they had hoped to. It seemed as though the sinister spirit of the place reached out to touch them clammily, even in this delightful, peaceful spot.

The sisters talked until the temptation of snowy beds became too much for them. And if there had been a cry from the silent, moon-bathed woodland back of the house, they would not have heard it, nor sensed the stealthy passage of motors in the road, had there been enough to stretch from night to dawn! They slept unstirring until the breakfast bell, ringing merrily, told them that the first real day of their vacation had begun.

And what a day it was! They had never before spent one like it and they never expected to spend one like it again.

As soon as they had washed and dressed and finished a well-cooked, substantial breakfast in the dining room, they went up into the woods, Helen carrying her drawing materials.

In the glorious morning sunlight, it seemed impossible that Mrs. Anderson's tales of strange sounds and screams at night could have any foundation. The woods were too beautiful, too fresh and verdant in the early morning drenching of fragrant dew, to harbor anything ugly and sinister.

And this seemed doubly true to Helen, at work upon a lovely scene of brook and fairy grotto with a background of steep-rising, tree-crowned hill.

She worked feverishly, transferring the scene to her canvas with a rapidity that seemed like magic.

Rose and Margy, roaming happily in the vicinity, came now and then to look over her shoulder. Once Rose gasped with sheer admiration and took her sister's arms in eager young fingers.

"Helen," she said, in earnest tones, "if I should listen very hard I could hear the purling of that little brook of yours. Sometimes I feel as though I hardly knew you at all, Nell dearest. You are so unlike us, my wonderful sister!"

Something swelled and swelled in Helen's

heart, until she was forced to put down her brush and gather the younger girl in her arms.

"Not half as wonderful as you, my little Rosebud."

Then they laughed together pretending it was all foolishness, and after a while Helen went on with her work.

A wonderful day! But when, at the end of it, they came swinging down the mountain trail one by one, Indian fashion, to Peach Farm they were startled to see some one sitting on a great flat boulder directly in their path.

The first glance told them that the somebody was Mrs. Butterworth. The second added the unhappy information that the woman was weeping bitterly.

CHAPTER XIX

Mrs. Butterworth's Niece

For a moment the Blythe Girls were undecided what to do. Should they try to go on without disturbing Mrs. Butterworth, or ought they to stop and offer their sympathy?

Mrs. Butterworth herself settled this question for them. Some slight sound apprised her of their presence. She looked up, startled, and hurriedly wiped her eyes.

"My goodness me!" she exclaimed. "What will you think of a body making such a fool of herself?"

"Not a thing, except that we'd like to help her, if there is any way we can," Helen answered gently.

Mrs. Butterworth tried to smile, and then, as much to her own surprise as anyone's, went off into another fit of weeping.

Helen silently handed her painting materials to Margy and, with an arm about the portly waist of Mrs. Butterworth, gently forced her back upon the big flat rock. Sitting down beside her, she said:

"We shall be very glad to help you, if you can only tell us what the trouble is."

Mrs. Butterworth sobbed for another moment, then dried her eyes resolutely.

"I just believe I will," she said. "You are girls, yourselves, and sweet ones, at that. Perhaps you can sympathize with my poor little girl better than most."

"I am sure we will try," said Helen gently.

"She went to the city," said the landlady, looking thoughtfully at her plump, comfortable-looking hands as she spoke. "And as pretty and smart a girl as you'd see, even if she was my niece. And just a baby, too—not quite eighteen!"

She paused and the sisters waited in a sympathetic and encouraging silence.

"Kit was too smart to be content to stay on the farm." There was a sigh in the voice of Mrs. Butterworth. "She wanted to earn her own living."

"That's a disease we all seem to be affected with these days," said Rose sagely.

Mrs Butterworth looked up at her pretty face and asked curiously:

"Are you a business girl, too?" and when Rose nodded she went on. "And such a child! It's hard to tell what the young folks are coming to these days. Well, my niece was set on going to the city to earn her own living, and

I couldn't bear to see her restless and unhappy. Finally, I said she could go if she must—but it near broke my heart."

The owner of Peach Farm paused and sighed again.

"It wasn't so bad when I kept hearing from her regularly," she continued. "Kit used to write me twice a week, and I could count on her letters as sure as I knew the cock would crow in the morning.

"Then all of a sudden they stopped coming—her letters. I haven't heard from her now—" Mrs Butterworth paused and looked tragically at the girls, "for over four weeks!"

The girls exclaimed sympathetically and moved a little closer to her.

"Have you written to the place where she worked?" asked Margy.

At the question, Mrs. Butterworth looked both confused and ashamed.

"I hate to say so," she said, in an embarrassed voice. "And seeing that Kit mentioned the place over and over in her letters, it seems so stupid like to admit that I forget the name of the place where she worked!"

She looked up at the girls helplessly, as though pleading for their tolerance.

"But surely," said Margy, "you can hunt up her letters and find out where she worked from them?"

Again the woman shook her head reluctantly.

"I never keep letters," she explained, adding, as though in apology: "I am so busy. There is always so much to do."

"I know," said Helen quickly, sympathetically. "And you run your place so beautifully. I have wondered how you managed it. I'm quite sure I couldn't."

Mrs. Butterworth looked grateful and patted Helen's hand.

"I think you could do anything you wanted to, my dear," she said simply. "But there is no use bothering you with my troubles," she added, getting up stiffly. "I dare say I will hear from Kit in a day or two, and then I will laugh at myself for worrying!"

"We certainly hope so!" replied Helen heartily.

They went on toward the house together, and this gave the girls an opportunity to ask about the mail.

"All the letters are taken down to the village in the morning," Mrs. Butterworth explained. "And when the man comes back, he brings those from the post-office. If you want your mail to go out, the best thing is to get it in the box by nine o'clock in the morning."

The girls thanked her, and that night wrote several long letters, several to girls of their

acquaintance and two or three to "the boys they had left behind them."

"I hope this gets to Hugh before he starts for Crag House," said Helen, as she sealed and stamped the letter she had written to the young lawyer. "He doesn't know yet that we have made a change."

"Unless Joe has told him," said Rose, looking up from the letter she was writing to Annabelle Black in which she minutely described their unpleasant experience at Crag House. "I imagine the story is too good for him to keep, especially as he knows how it will interest Hugh and Lloyd."

"Oh, bother, I suppose I ought to write to Lloyd too!" Margy had picked up a magazine which she now put down reluctantly. "These men are a nuisance."

Rose exchanged a glance with Helen and winked.

"Isn't she the man hater, though? But the boys seem to like it, at that," she admitted. "I'd be willing to bet that not only Lloyd, but Dale Elton as well, will show up over the week end."

"Hope they come together," said Margy maliciously. "They love each other so!"

"Oh, do keep still, you two, and give me a chance to write," said Helen, looking up from

her letter. "Three times I've spelled weather and three times, I've spelled it wrong!"

"All right," replied Margy, putting down her magazine and taking her pen. "Be sure and give our love to Hugh."

Once having written to their friends in the city, the girls felt better. They had done their duty, and from now on would have nothing to do but enjoy themselves.

They thought a great deal about the unfortunate niece of Mrs. Butterworth. They could see that the latter was worried. Her plump, pleasant face began to show lines about the mouth and eyes and the girls noticed that she seldom smiled.

"It must be hard on her to have to stay here and act as if nothing had happened," said Rose, "when all the time her heart is as heavy as lead. I wonder if she has heard from Kit yet?"

"Probably would have told us if she had," remarked Margy.

The sisters were in the woods, bent on a luxurious, all-day ramble with no one to tell them when it was time to go home.

That mysterious, branching trail up through the woods back of Peach Farm had beckoned to them tantalizingly from the day they had discovered it. Now they decided to follow its

winding, upward course and find to what lofty spot it led.

Mrs. Butterworth had readily consented to have a basket-lunch prepared, in place of the customary dinner at the house.

In her generous style, she had packed for them quantities of chicken sandwiches, a thermos bottle full of cold milk, home-made rolls and cake, and sufficient fruit for a small army.

So, fully equipped and in the best of spirits —it was time for them to hear from the boys concerning their plans for the week end, and they confidently expected to find letters awaiting them on their return to the house—the girls started off on their adventure.

"We might as well be Columbus, discovering America," chuckled Margy, who led the way. "If anybody has been up this path before us, you certainly wouldn't know it by the looks of things."

"If somebody hadn't been up there before us, there wouldn't have been any path," said Rose, with indisputable logic.

Margy grinned tolerantly, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Good child!" she observed.

As they made their way over rocks and the trunks of fallen trees, frequently being forced to stop and untangle hair and clothing from too close contact with branches and prickly

bushes, Rose became conscious of a feeling of depression.

So strong did this feeling become that several times she was on the point of confiding it to her sisters. She even considered once begging them to go back to the safety of Peach Farm.

But her pride rebelled at this seeming cowardice, and she shrank at the thought of Margy's gibes and ridicule. Practical Margy could never understand or tolerate such silly things as nerves, and the fear of the dark woods and loneliness.

In vain did the younger girl try to argue herself out of the mood. She would not let it spoil the day for her!

She was worried about Joe, that was all, and the danger of his new position. Then, too, there was the rumor concerning the insolvency of Lossar-Martin's to bother her, to nag perpetually at the back of her mind, despite her utmost effort to put the thought from her. If Lossar-Martin's closed she would be out of a position. And there were so few jobs to be had and so many applicants!

She shook herself impatiently. She would forget such things, put them out of her thoughts —for these two weeks, at least. She was on a vacation, wasn't she? And she was on a vacation for the purpose of enjoying herself. She *would* enjoy herself!

In spite of this sensible resolution, Rose found her depression deepening the farther they pressed into the woods.

The trail had become narrower now and steeper. In some spots it was almost impassable.

Several times they were forced to stop and rest before continuing the climb.

"It certainly shows that we have had desk jobs this winter," said Margy, leaning against a tree, panting. "We're soft, that's what we are!"

"Guilty," said Helen, as she sat down on the ground and rubbed her aching muscles. "If we aren't all cramped up to-night, it will be funny!"

"Oh, Nell, don't!" Rose was distressed. "There's nothing in the least romantic about cramps. And I will be romantic, or die in the attempt!"

She jumped up on a huge boulder to get a better view of the surrounding country. Before the startled gaze of her sisters she became suddenly rigid, frozen to the spot.

Her eyes were staring fixedly at some object deep in the woods, hidden from their view.

CHAPTER XX

Trailed

With an exclamation, Margy started forward. But Rose raised her hand in a slight, warning gesture. When she spoke, it was in a faint, utterly unnatural voice.

"Stay where you are!" she commanded. "If we move, it will attack us!"

"What *are* you talking about?"

Helen had recovered her voice. Ignoring Rose's caution, she stepped nearer to the younger girl. "Rose are you crazy?"

For answer, Rose slowly lifted her hand and pointed into the woods. Still incredulous, the eyes of Margy and Helen followed the direction of her pointing finger.

Then they saw it!

Motionless, a shadow against the deeper shadows of the woodland, was a great brown bear!

He was looking directly at them, but there was no ferocity in his gaze. He seemed merely puzzled and inquiring.

For a moment the girls stood as motionless

as their enemy, half-paralyzed by astonishment and fright.

They were afraid to move. Any action on their part would undoubtedly excite the bear to action also. Yet they were even more afraid to stay where they were.

Even through their fright they had the bewildered feeling that they could not be living through this scene. Things like that didn't happen in broad daylight and in a perfectly friendly forest!

Margy was the first to recover her wits.

"A bear won't attack, as a rule, unless it is attacked," she said, in a monotonous, level voice. "I think our best chance is to stay absolutely still."

They might have followed her advice too, if Bruin had not chosen that moment to take a step toward them.

Rose leaped from the rock and darted blindly into the woods, crashing recklessly through the heavy underbrush. After that, there was nothing left for Helen and Margy except to follow as quickly as possible.

This they did, leaving the bear to stare after them with a surprised and mildly troubled expression. Then, slowly, he padded after them.

That nightmare pursuit through the woods,

the girls were to remember for the rest of their lives.

Gasping, breathless, thoroughly frightened, they continued their flight through the unexplored heart of the woods.

Rose turned her ankle and fell. She thought at first that it was either broken or badly sprained, and for a while Margy and Helen half carried the younger girl between them.

But when the first pain was gone, Rose found that she could bear her weight on the ankle, though it still hurt and she limped some.

"But we couldn't run fast in the midst of this growth if I had four good ankles!" complained Rose.

Ever and again they stopped and listened fearfully. And always, they heard that shuffling tramp behind them, the crackling of twigs and bushes, as the great beast trampled them underfoot.

"We can't go much farther!" Rose cried at last, leaning heavily on Helen's arm. "Can't we climb a tree?"

"Not half as fast as the bear," replied Margy.

Then Rose became suddenly furious.

"If he wants us, then why doesn't he come on?" she cried, shaking her fist in the direction of their shadowy trailer. "Helen, what can we do? My ankle still hurts!"

By luck, they presently struck another mountain trail.

"I believe this is a cow path," said Helen breathlessly. "It probably leads to water farther on."

The words had scarcely been spoken when the gleam of sun on water flashed at them through the trees. A moment later they came out upon a small body of water, one of those tiny lakes or big ponds that sometimes occur in the mountains, fed as they are, by countless mountain springs.

Again the girls were faced by a terrifying problem. The pond might be shallow enough to ford. Then again, it was apt to be very deep. The Blythe girls were not particularly good swimmers. With their clothes on and the iciness of the mountain lake, the result of such an attempt would be extremely doubtful.

Then, too, there was always the possibility that, in the meantime, Bruin would skirt the pond and be waiting to greet them on the opposite shore!

No, there was nothing for it. They must skirt the pond and take their chance. They were puzzled by the deliberate but steady pursuit of the brute. If he meant to attack them, why was he so slow about it?

Almost exhausted and desperate, the girls turned to their right, to skirt the pond, won-

dering if they would ever reach the shelter of the woods on the farther side. Rose's ankle had swollen and was painful.

They had barely reached the end of the tiny body of water when the bear crashed through the underbursh and stood on the spot where they had been a moment before.

The presence of the brute so close to them urged the girls to further and more frantic effort. Exhausted as they were, they could make scant headway. They were all but hopeless when Margy, throwing a glance over her shoulder, called out sharply:

"The bear! Look!"

They scarcely dared believe what they saw! The brown bear had waddled over to the lake, taken a long and deliberate drink, and, as deliberately, turned away. What interested the girls so profoundly was the fact that he had turned down the path that led away from them!

"Now, what do you know about that!"

The girls leaned weakly against a tree, staring after the bear incredulously.

Then suddenly Rose began to laugh, wildly, hysterically, holding on to her sisters for support.

"Girls," she gasped. "Did you see what I saw? That bear had a collar around its neck!"

"A tame bear," said Helen, staring helplessly at the younger girl.

"Humph!" snorted Margy, supremely disgusted with Rose and herself and her panic and everything else that had caused her to look ridiculous. "Pity you didn't notice that before!"

Rose sobered suddenly and began to tremble.

"You could have noticed it, as well as I," she retorted. "You needn't put all the responsibility on me."

"For goodness' sake, don't quarrel about it, girls." Helen had sunk down on the first available spot. The fact that this was the mossy bank of the lake itself and that it was extremely damp and uncomfortable, failed to trouble her in the least. "You ought to be thankful we escaped."

"You don't notice us crying about it, do you?" retorted Rose. She sat down beside Helen and nursed her swollen ankle. "But if you expect me to do a war dance in celebration, I fear you will be disappointed."

It was Margy's turn to laugh. She started with a small ripple of merriment, and ended in a mirthful roar. After one surprised glance, her sisters caught the contagion and joined in.

"It's too—ridiculous," gasped Margy, at last. "That bear wasn't the least interested

in us, really. He trailed us just out of curiosity."

"He wanted a drink probably—"

"And we thought he was after a cannibal feast," giggled Rose, still a bit hysterically. "Oh, girls, I want to go home! I'm sore all over!"

It was really little short of a miracle that they were able to find their way at all. It was comparatively easy to find the cow path that had led them to the pond. But after they came to the end of that, the only thing they had to guide them was the crushed and trampled bushes through which the bear had crashed his heavy weight.

In spite of the fact that they now felt assured that the bear was a trained animal, temporarily separated from its master, the girls had not completely recovered from their fright. Even if the bear was tamed, they saw no particular end to be gained by meeting him in his native habitat. There was the rather terrifying possibility to be considered that he might, since his escape from his master, have reverted to type!

"He should have had a muzzle on him," said Rose once, as she looked uneasily into the deceptive shadows of the woods.

"A muzzle would have been rather reassuring!" agreed Margy.

They came at last to the familiar trail that led down through the woods at the back of Peach Farm. Once on this path, the girls recovered most of their confidence, Rose declaring that even her swollen ankle felt better.

The reaction following their fright, coupled with a very natural fatigue, accounted for the silence that fell upon the girls as they made the last of the hard journey back to the farm.

If they had been in their usual noisy high spirits, it is probable they would never have made the startling discovery that they did.

When they had almost reached the open space back of the house they were arrested by the sound of voices raised in angry altercation. Suddenly the voices were interrupted by a sharp, terrified cry, the cry of a child in pain.

Something in the sound of it stirred Margy to action. Her eyes kindled as she made a gesture of caution to the girls.

"Stay here for a moment, and don't make a sound!" she ordered. "I intend to see what's going on over here!"

CHAPTER XXI

The Sheriff

The voices came from the other side of a small mound or hillock not far from where the Blythe girls stood.

As Margy started forward, Helen put out a hand as though to restrain her.

Margy gently but firmly put aside the hand and crept swiftly forward.

Helen started to follow, but Rose cried out with pain as she put her full weight on her injured ankle. The older girl found herself between two fires, as it were. She could not very well leave Rose. Yet Margy was putting herself in almost certain danger and Helen's instinct was to rush forward and interpose herself between the rash girl and harm. It was characteristic of Helen that, in moments of danger, she never gave herself or her personal safety a thought.

While she hesitated, Margy reached the mound, drew herself softly up it, and peered over the top. What she saw on the other side of it, caused her to utter a sharp exclamation.

If the two men had not been so absorbed in their own affairs, they must certainly have heard her. What terrible thing might have happened in that case, can only be conjectured.

The men on the other side of that mound, Margy recognized immediately. They were two of the rascals of the red car, and one of them was the great burly ruffian who had so brutally beaten the poor little lad at the junction.

What made it hard for Margy to keep still was the fact that the child himself was there also. In fact he seemed to be the chief cause of the quarrel between the two men.

He stood a short distance away, cringing and cowering, shrinking back against the trunk of a tree as one or the other of the men turned toward him with a threatening gesture.

Finally, in a burst of rage, the big man swung a hairy fist at his slighter companion. The latter ducked nimbly and made off through the woods—fortunately in the opposite direction from Margy.

The assailant, baffled in his rage, turned and caught the cowering child by the collar. Brutally he rammed the lad ahead of him through the woods, in the direction his companion had taken.

Margy watched them eagerly, scarcely daring to breathe.

Suddenly, before her astonished eyes and while the two men and the little lad were still distinctly visible to her, the earth seemed to open and swallow them up.

A moment before, there they had been, in full view. Now, presto! they were gone.

Puzzled and excited, Margy made her way back to Helen and Rose.

"Don't ask me any questions now," she warned them, in a low tone. "I don't trust these woods. I have a feeling there is an ear in every tree!"

As quickly as they could the girls made their way down the path and out into the open space back of Peach Farm.

There, Margy told her sisters what she had seen, including the mysterious manner in which the two men and the boy had disappeared.

"This is a case for a detective, sure enough," said Rose, as they made their way wearily to the house.

It was at that moment that Helen remembered the lunch that Mrs. Butterworth had prepared for them that morning. Helen had been carrying it when the bear appeared upon the scene. She had dropped it somewhere, probably in the bushes beside the big boulder.

"We probably would have seen it on our way back if we had had sense enough to look," Margy remarked disgustedly.

"And I am simply starved," wailed Rose.

"It must be away past dinner time," said Helen. "But I dare say Mrs. Butterworth can have a sandwich made for us, if we ask real pretty. We can go back for the basket of lunch the first thing to-morrow morning," she added.

They found Mrs. Butterworth in a state bordering upon hysteria. When the girls showed their sympathy she confided in them the reason for her "attack of nerves."

Taking them into the yard back of the kitchen where they would be out of earshot of the curious kitchen help, she told them that the farm had just been visited by the sheriff of the district.

Rose thought of Joe and wondered if he had been using his tin star again.

However, this supposition was instantly disproved by the next words of Mrs. Butterworth. It appeared that this sheriff was the genuine article and he was out on serious business.

"He was looking for a woman," Mrs. Butterworth said, in a lowered voice, glancing about to make sure she was not overheard.

"A woman!" the girls gasped in unison, and Rose added:

"What kind of a woman?"

"A convict," explained Mrs. Butterworth, continuing to glance about her nervously. "They say she is a dangerous criminal and

just recently escaped from jail. I knew something suspicious was going on in those woods," she added, with a tightening of her lips and a nod of her head, as though she secretly derived some satisfaction from the fact that her suspicions had been verified.

Margy looked questioningly at Helen and the latter nodded. Thereupon Margy launched into a detailed narrative of what she had seen in the woods a short time before, including the mysterious manner in which the two men and their small victim had disappeared.

Mrs. Butterworth was interested and more than ever disturbed.

"And right back of the house, you say?" she questioned them. "Mercy on us, what will become of us!"

When the girls mentioned that they had seen the men of the red auto before, their landlady became more than ever excited. She questioned the girls closely regarding the appearance of the auto and the men in it, nodding her head several times in eager acquiescence.

"That car often passes our house," she said. "And I have noticed the man who generally sits at the wheel. A burly brute, just as you describe him, and a dangerous looking one, if ever I saw one!"

Suddenly Rose uttered a startled exclamation and her eyes brightened.

"Girls, how did I come to forget it! Then, as they stared at her uncomprehendingly, she added impatiently: "Did you forget what I said about one of those men looking like a woman to me?"

Helen and Margy became excited then, for they remembered Rose's assertion very well. Also, Margy recalled that one of the men she had seen that very afternoon was slight of build and short.

Could it be that Rose's suspicion was correct?

Between them, the Blythe girls managed to get Mrs. Butterworth considerably upset.

"The pity is, you didn't come while the sheriff was here," she said, over and over. "And to think that he went off only a few minutes before you came!"

Helen suggested that it might be possible to get into communication with the officer and apprise him of their suspicions.

At this, Mrs. Butterworth brightened and said she would do that very thing at once.

"One thing is sure," said Helen, after they had partaken of the sandwiches and milk which Mrs. Butterworth good-naturedly prepared for them. "Our vacation, so far, has not had a dull minute."

"And from present appearances, it bids fair to continue so to the end," chuckled Rose.

"Look here, girls, there seems to be some mail for us."

There was quite a fair-sized packet of it. Eagerly, the three girls possessed themselves of the rapidly sorted letters and went upstairs to their rooms.

It was cool and airy there and, after putting on the thinnest raiment they could find, they flung themselves upon the big bed in the double room, to read their correspondence in luxurious ease.

Joe had written in his usual light and humorous vein, promising to turn up before long, for that chicken dinner. Rose read parts of this missive aloud, and the girls giggled lightheartedly over them.

"If only he will take care of himself and not get shot," thought Rose, as she put down his letter and took up one addressed in the bold and vigorous hand of Annabelle Black.

Helen had only one missive but it was a thick and bulky one from Hugh, through which ran the same monotonous refrain.

"The old place isn't the same without you. Everything looks wrong!" Take it all in all, Helen felt no cause to complain.

Hugh also wrote that he would not be able to get away for as long a vacation as he had planned. "Have won the case," he wrote, "but there is another one piling right on the

heels of it. I can get up by Friday and stay over the week end, but that promises to be the extent of my vacation this year. I hear," he went on, "that Lloyd and our promising young journalist, Dale Elton, are both planning to spend this same week end at Peach Farm. So we ought to have quite a party!"

Helen thought so, too, and chuckled quietly as she put the letter away.

Among them all, there should certainly be no lack of excitement over the week end!

CHAPTER XXII

The Dance

Of the three Blythe girls, Margy alone was disturbed. Seeing that she had received more letters than either of her sisters, this fact might have seemed inexplicable to one who did not know that the square, expensive bit of stationery bore the handwriting of one who, of all people, Margy sincerely detested.

The girl regretted the impulse that had caused her to write Miss Pepper concerning her change of address immediately upon arriving at Peach Farm. Her employer's objectionable nephew had evidently procured the information with ease from the absent-minded old lady.

How dared he write to her when he knew very well how she disliked him! And he even had the impudence to reiterate his determination to motor some day, not to Crag House, but to Peach Farm! Oh, yes, there could be no doubt but what he had the address straight. If he came out on Saturday or Sunday, it would give her great pleasure to set Dale or

Lloyd on him—or both. This thought was comforting. She even smiled over it and felt better.

That evening Helen told Mrs. Butterworth that some friends were planning to come up for the week end.

Mrs. Butterworth replied that she could put the young gentlemen up, provided they "didn't mind crowding."

Helen said that she was quite sure they would not, but later modified this assertion by adding to Margy and Rose that she hoped Lloyd and Dale would not be assigned to the same room.

Margy seemed uninterested, but Rose giggled in joyful anticipation.

"It would be fun to arrange it so and see how much was left of Dale and Lloyd by Monday morning."

"And there sits the child that wouldn't go to a bull fight!" remarked Margy dryly, thereby sending them off in fresh gales of merriment.

Great preparations were made for Hugh's arrival. There were other guests expected on the Friday afternoon train on which Hugh was scheduled to arrive. Mrs. Butterworth said she would send both her large and small cars, so that there would be no crowding.

"Not that Hugh would object, provided he could sit next to Helen," giggled Rose, and

was rewarded by a deepening of the color beneath Helen's fair skin.

The latter became increasingly nervous as the time approached for Hugh's arrival. It was decided at the last minute that the cars would be crowded after all, so Rose and Margy were to stay at the farm and watch for "the conquering hero."

"Be sure you don't stop for a ramble on the way back," Rose called after the car, as it started off, with Helen in the back seat. "Remember, we are almost as anxious to see Hugh as you are!"

The train was almost an hour late. Helen became restless, left the machine and wandered off into the woods to kill time until the train should arrive.

It seemed only a short time to her after that when she heard the warning whistle of the locomotive. Turning, she hurried back to the road; was about to cross it when a motor car, driven at tremendous speed, flashed by her, almost running her down.

Helen jumped backward and stared after the car. With a queer, prickling feeling at the base of her scalp, she realized that it was red in color and of a shape that had become far too familiar to her in the past few days.

What was that red car doing so close to Peach Farm?

She had little time to think about it, for the train was drawing into the station. She would have to hurry, or Hugh would find no one at the station to meet him, which would *never* do!

As she reached the platform, a little breathless, a tall, gray-garbed figure swung down toward her, grasped both her hands in his own in a joyful greeting.

"Helen! Great Scott, it seems ten years since you left New York! Don't ever dare do it again! Do you hear?"

Helen laughed and led Hugh toward the big touring car which was to take them to Peach Farm.

"So this is the farm wagon, is it?" he said, regarding the car quizzically. "Looks like a million dollars. Well, Helen, how have you been?"

They were in the car, and Hugh had somehow disposed of his suitcase somewhere beneath his long legs. Now he turned to the girl, his eyes eager.

"It's been a million years since you went away!" he said.

"You said something like that before," Helen replied demurely. And they laughed together in complete light-heartedness.

Helen told him something of what they had done since their arrival at Peach Farm. When

she said she had begun another picture he was unfeignedly eager to see it.

"As soon as we get there?" he insisted, and Helen, delighted at his insistence, assented.

But when she told him of their experience in the woods, of the mystery surrounding Peach Farm and the red auto, he became grave.

"I can see you need a detective around here," he said, and the assertion was more serious than joking.

Upon their arrival at Peach Farm, Rose and Margy welcomed the young fellow with outstretched arms—almost literally! Rose wondered why Margy was always so much pleasanter with Hugh than she was with either Dale or Lloyd. Probably because Hugh so patently admired Helen! Margy was funny!

Hugh Draper made a great and instant impression upon Mrs. Butterworth. So sincere and openly expressed was her admiration of the young lawyer that "Hugh's new conquest" was a byword with the girls during the remainder of his stay at Peach Farm.

Since Hugh was, in turn, impressed both by Peach Farm and its pleasant, comely owner, he was not in the least annoyed by these pleasantries.

Hugh was enthusiastic over Helen's new picture, and, late as the hour was, insisted upon seeing the spot that it pictured. The girls led

him joyfully up the little trail through the woods, which had now become so familiar to them.

When they came to the place where Helen had painted her picture, Hugh recognized it, brook and all—which pleased the young artist mightily.

Then the girls took him to the great rock from which Rose had first discovered the tame bear. The lunch Helen had dropped there had, by the way, been recovered long since by the girls and devoured with great gusto.

On the way back Margy pointed out the place where she had overheard the conversation between the two men. When she told of their peculiar disappearance, Hugh was much interested and declared his intention of "looking around a bit" the next morning.

But this intention was not carried out until later. The reason for that was the unexpected arrival of Lloyd Roberts and Dale Elton the following morning just before dinner time. They had announced their intention of coming up by the afternoon train, and Mrs. Butterworth had agreed to meet them.

Now, instead, here they were several hours too early, in an ancient hack they had evidently hired in the village. It was drawn by a poor old horse, which, they later solemnly declared, had three times gone to sleep in the road.

Both the boys looked disgruntled, and the girls could have shrieked with laughter at sight of their gloomy faces.

The moment he alighted from the cab, Lloyd went over to Margy and pressed upon her a highly ornamented three pound box of chocolates.

Behind his back Dale Elton scowled viciously.

"You might know that poor fish would find some way to get ahead of me," Rose, who happened to be closest to him, heard him mutter.

That was the beginning of an hilarious time for the girls.

As they had anticipated, it was a continual game of "get there first" between Margy's two admirers, and Rose, little wretch that she was, took the keenest delight in egging them on.

Mrs. Butterworth had told them of the regular Saturday night dance at a hotel not many miles from Peach Farm. About six o'clock on the evening after the boys' arrival, they all decided to attend. Several other young people had come up to the farm on the afternoon train, so that the party promised to be a merry one.

The girls dressed in a flutter, getting in each other's way and keeping up a continual merry

chatter. They found considerable difficulty in picking out the prettiest frock for the occasion.

"Though, goodness knows, we have few enough to choose from," giggled Rose, not at all cast down by the fact.

Helen decided at last on a pale blue georgette —a terrible extravagance, that pretty dress. Helen could remember the qualms of conscience she had suffered after buying it. But there was no doubt but what it was the prettiest and most becoming thing she had ever had.

Rose decided on a yellow organdy of frivolous cut. And when she was dressed and the shining curls carefully brushed, her one regret was that Joe could not be there to enjoy the effect!

Margy was stunning in a handsome gray satin and chiffon creation, with tiny yellow roses looping up the overdress. It was a gown that Miss Pepper had insisted on buying for her the month before when Margy had to appear rather prominently in her employer's interests at a national convention of women meeting in New York. Rose was charmed with the effect, declaring that Margy looked like some exotic Spanish maid.

"Poor Dale and Lloyd," she giggled. "What a terrible time they will have to-night! You don't deserve all that attention, you hard-hearted thing!"

The young people had a wonderful time at the dance—better, even, than they had anticipated. The hotel was an elaborate and expensive one. The dance floor was perfect and the music irresistible. Add to all this good company, and what more could any one ask?

During the intermission the young folks had ice-cream, lemonade and cakes. The boys felt they "had to do something for the hotel," they said, and insisted on treating to the limit.

On the way home, Rose was enjoying a flippant chat with Dale Elton when she overheard something Lloyd said to Margy. It was only a sentence, but the import of it was sufficient to spoil the whole glorious evening for her.

"Those trucks Joe is guarding are heaped to the top with valuable goods," the young fellow said. "I tell you, I wouldn't be in that boy's skin for anything—not, that is, if I valued my skin!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Joe Is Attacked

Through all the hilarity of the day following the dance, which was Sunday, Rose could not erase from her memory the words that Lloyd had thoughtlessly spoken during the ride home the previous evening. She remained uneasy and worried.

Despite the fact that she did her best to reason herself out of this state of mind, she succeeded so ill that at last the young folks went off for a hike in the woods without her, leaving her at home to "enjoy her mopes," as Margy unfeelingly remarked.

"Of course," thought Rose, feeling very much abused, "you never could expect Margy to understand such things!"

They had driven to the village to church in the morning, but, after that, Rose sat in her room and "moped" and wrote a letter to Annabelle while the rest of them had a pleasant time in the woods.

All the boys had been much interested in the red car, the sheriff, and the runaway woman

convict. They scoured the spot where Margy insisted she had seen the two men and the boy vanish, and, since they could find nothing but the usual rocks and trees and underbrush that abide in all wooded places, they ended by teasing her unmercifully and asserting that their only explanation of it was that she must have fallen asleep and dreamed it all.

It may have been the effect of the teasing, or it might have been because of her indifference to male creatures in general. At any rate, Margy did not seem depressed when, on returning to the house, both Dale and Lloyd announced that they must, without fail, take the late afternoon train for the city.

"Just when we were beginning to enjoy life, too!" deplored Rose, with a charming grimace. "Whatever will we do without you?"

"Foolish child," replied Margy, with a hard-hearted glance at her two admirers. "I imagine we shall be able to bear up under the blow."

"Sometime," Dale told her mournfully, "you will regret those words."

"And perhaps it will then be too late," finished Lloyd.

However, Margy refused to be cast down, but laughed merrily instead.

Nevertheless, Peach Farm would seem rather empty and forlorn for a few hours after

the boys had gone. The girls had hoped to have Hugh with them until the following morning, but he was eager to get on with the new case.

"Probably I can get off the latter part of next week, though," he told Helen privately. "Maybe Thursday or Friday, for the week end."

"And then go home with us, perhaps!" Helen exclaimed.

Hugh, looking into the eager flushed face, responded with more than his usual enthusiasm.

Then they were gone, and the Blythe girls were again left to their own devices. The thing they naturally did, being wearied out with the long day of excitement, was to go straight to bed.

Whether they dreamed it or not, they could not tell in the bright sunlight of the following morning. But it seemed to them that the long night had been filled with queer noises—the snorting exhaust of a machine tearing along the road in front of the peach orchard, the eerie sound of distant voices, a stifled scream in the stillness of the woods.

"Probably a screech owl," Margy said crossly, in talking over these impressions. Her sleep had done her little good, filled as it had been with subconscious disturbances. "We're

crazy, to let such things bother us. Just plain crazy."

Helen and Rose thought so, too. After an excellent breakfast in Mrs. Butterworth's sunny dining room, they were ready to declare that they had not a care in the world.

They started out to the woods directly after breakfast. Helen carried her sketching materials under her arm, and, by the dreamy eagerness of her eyes, her sisters knew that the inspired mood had caught her again. For several hours, at least, they would not be able to count upon Helen for companionship.

They left her on her favorite rock, sketching busily, and went off through the woods to explore on their own account. By this time, they felt so familiar with the woodland, that the thought of becoming lost never occurred to them. Neither were they able to explain how they came to wander so far in so short a space of time.

It was Margy who first discovered the appalling truth.

"This is very strange, Rose," she said, looking about her in bewildered fashion. "This path should have taken us back to Helen long ago. What do you make of it?"

Rose was deep in troubled thought. She was wondering why she had not heard from Joe, why, above all, he had not yet appeared for

that chicken dinner. The thought of the gun he carried and the constant danger of his new position, made these speculations very perturbing. Then, too, she was still worried about Lossar-Martin's and the possibility of its failure. Foolish, she thought, to let such things oppress her on a day like this amid such pleasant surroundings. She should have been utterly happy and carefree. Yet, it was impossible not to brood sometimes.

Margy's statement startled her from her thoughts. She looked about her vaguely at first, then with increasing alarm.

"Right you are," she admitted. "This place is entirely strange to me. Now, what do you suggest?"

"Gracious!" cried Margy. "Why put all the responsibility on me? I suppose we shall have to keep on going till we come out on a road somewhere."

Rose giggled nervously.

"Sounds easy," she said. "But try to do it!"

"We will," retorted Margy, and thereupon started off determinedly through the woods.

After an hour of fruitless wandering and growing alarm, the two sisters decided that if there were any roads in that vicinity, they, at least, could not discover them.

They became very uneasy after a while, and

sat down on the stump of a tree to talk things over.

"Probably all this time we have been busily going around in circles," said Rose, trying valiantly to dissemble her agitation.

"Like a kitten chasing its tail," observed Margy. "And, as far as I can see, we shall have to keep on doing it indefinitely," she added grimly. "Come on, Rose. We can't sit here!"

Half an hour later found them utterly dispirited and forlorn. Try as they would to find some familiar landmark in that unfamiliar woodland, the forest still maintained its impenetrable front.

By this time they were thoroughly frightened. The thought of spending a night in that dense woodland filled them with a strange sort of panic.

"We must find the road, Margy, we must!" and Rose started off once more aimlessly, crashing through the thick underbrush. Margy followed more slowly but with a dogged desperation that matched Rose's own.

The rumbling of thunder in the distance made them pause and exchange glances.

A storm!

"A storm! All we need to make our happiness complete!" exclaimed Rose, throwing out

her arms in a gesture of helplessness. "Now what shall we do?"

"Keep going," answered Margy, with a remnant of her old cheerfulness. "We may stumble upon some hut or cave, or something that will at least give us shelter from the rain."

They kept on without much hope. The thunder came closer and the first drops of rain fell drearily.

"It is so dark," Rose said once, stopping and peering through the heavy undergrowth ahead of her. "It almost seems as though it were night. Margy, if—"

"Look," interrupted Margy, gripping her sister by the arm. "Am I crazy, or is that the road ahead of us?"

"Margy! It believe it is—"

There came the sudden report of a pistol—another and another! A wild shout, either of agony or rage, reached the ears of the girls. They stood motionless. Another shout, more cries, more pistol shots!

Margy took Rose by the arm and together they stumbled through the woods toward that vague, white ribbon ahead that marked the road.

When they had almost reached it Rose fell back among the trees, dragging Margy with her. A car flashed by so swiftly and so close

to them that they could feel the breeze from it upon their faces.

"The red car!" gasped Rose. "Oh, Margy, something horrible has happened!"

The two Blythe girls reached the road in time to see a man stagger from the bushes opposite. The fellow's face was agonized. Blood streamed from a jagged gash in his forehead.

Rose recognized him—sprang forward across the road and grasped him by the arm.

"You're Jim!" she cried, shaking him in her terror. "Joe! Where is Joe?"

The man shook himself free and started down the road in the direction taken by the red car. Rose ran after him; caught his arm again.

"Joe!" she cried again wildly. "Where is he?"

The man looked at her vaguely for a moment, then without another word, turned and staggered down the road. He had gone but a few feet when he threw up his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Joe—shot—" he muttered and fainted.

Together the girls dragged him into the bushes at the side of the road.

"Stay here with him, Margy," Rose said. Her face was white and drawn as she got to her feet and looked up the road. "I must find Joe."

She went in a daze, yet swiftly, turned a bend in the road and saw the truck, Joe's truck, ahead of her. There was something lying beside it, something crumpled and motionless.

Rose gave a strangled cry and ran forward. It was Joe! His eyes were closed, his face white. Rose tore open his coat; saw on his white shirt, near the shoulder, a spreading, ominous stain.

She fought the wave of faintness that swept over her. She tore open his collar at the throat and got, somehow, to her feet. Water—she must get water—

The sound of her name caused her to turn swiftly. Margy and the truck driver were coming toward her. Margy had her arm about the young man, supporting him.

"The dirty crooks!" Jim almost sobbed, in his anger and his fear for Joe. "Let me get at 'em!"

Margy looked up at the sky—saw that the storm was passing over.

"Lucky!" she muttered. "At least there is no rain to complicate matters. Do you know the way to Peach Farm?" she asked Jim. She was on her knees beside Joe, trying to staunch the ugly wound in his shoulder with her handkerchief. And, as the young fellow nodded,

she added: "Can you get us there—are you strong enough to drive?"

Jim answered that he was and had so far recovered that he was able to help the girls lift Joe into the truck. Rose sat with Joe's head in her lap while Margy climbed into the seat beside the driver.

"Hurry," she begged. "A few minutes may mean the difference between life and death."

Jim nodded, set his mouth grimly, and started the motor.

CHAPTER XXIV

Anxious Hours

Mrs. Butterworth came running to meet the truck as it turned into the road that led through the orchard to the house. Helen's joy at seeing her sisters again was tempered with surprise and alarm at the manner of their return.

When Margy explained briefly what had happened, they wasted no words in idle lamentation. Mrs. Butterworth called two of the men who worked about the farm and between them they got Joe into a vacant room. Luckily, most of the guests were away at the time, so that the girls were spared their curiosity.

Joe was still unconscious, but Mrs. Butterworth set about at once applying restoratives and ordering cold water for the cleansing and staunching of the wound.

She would have put Jim to bed and nursed him too, if the young fellow had not protested so strenuously. He must go to the nearest town at once, he asserted, to get a doctor for Joe, start the police on the trail of the red car, and notify his employer of the robbery.

"Joe and I will probably both get sacked for this," he prophesied gloomily, as he started off.

Meanwhile the Blythe girls and Mrs. Butterworth worked over Joe. The young fellow drew a long sigh and moved the hand that Rose held in hers. Rose knelt down beside him.

"Joe! Joe, do you know me?"

The young fellow opened his eyes, saw her, and smiled waveringly. Then he gave a sudden hoarse cry and would have sprung from the bed had not Mrs. Butterworth prevented him.

"There, there, young man," she said soothingly. "Better be careful how you jump around. Just lie still and rest awhile. You'll soon be as chipper as ever."

Joe groaned and covered his face with his hands.

"They got away with it—the crooks!" he muttered.

"Did they take much, Joe?" It was Helen who asked the question, gently.

"Only some pretty near priceless silks and a chest of dress ornaments that would put a dent in the bank roll of a meat trust," he told them.

When they told him that Jim had gone to notify the police, he seemed slightly comforted, though he had no illusions as to his own fate.

"It's the end of my job," he said. "The manager is the king of all crabs. He'd never miss an opportunity like this to hand me my walking papers."

Rose was secretly glad that this was so, since she hardly enjoyed having Joe a target for all the gunmen in the city or its environs. But she had tact enough not to tell Joe what was in her thoughts.

The doctor, sent by Jim from Grangeville, arrived very shortly. He was a stout good-humored person who said he had put some court plaster on Jim's head where the bullet had grazed it.

Upon examination, he added the comforting assurance that Joe's wound was not serious, since the bullet had gone through the fleshy part of the arm without injuring the bone.

"A good rest is all you need, my boy," he said.

"And the last thing I want," ruefully retorted Joe.

It was several hours before Jim returned, and on his heels came the manager of Joe's company. It was evident from the minute his touring car purred up to the house that the owner of it was in a towering rage.

He was a tall man, and broad to match, with craggy features that were not improved by temper. Despite the protests of Mrs. Butter-

worth, this person forced his way up to Joe's room and in fury flung open the door.

Joe turned and half rose in bed, his face whitening with pain as he did so. The angry girls, crowding behind the manager, saw the young fellow try to smile. But the smile faded before the wrath in the other man's face.

"Sorry," said Joe briefly, and sank back on his pillow with a stifled moan.

"Sorry!" repeated the manager, advancing into the room. "Is that all you have to say for yourself, you coward?"

The words were scarcely spoken when the speaker was violently pushed aside. He turned angrily, to find himself looking into the blazing eyes of Jim.

"Coward, yourself!" gritted the truck driver, hands clinched. "If you had a fraction of that boy's pluck," with a gesture toward Joe, "you'd be ashamed to insult a man when you know he can't talk back. Get out of here, you rat, before I kick you out!"

The girls, thrilled, crowded closer. But the manager, startled by Jim's towering rage, backed out of the room, mumbling something, and sought the stairs.

They followed him, all but Rose, who turned back for a moment into Joe's room.

The young fellow had turned his face to

the wall. As Rose came toward him he did not move.

Gently the girl put a hand on his arm. A moan was wrenched from Joe. He reached up and took the comforting little hand tight in his big brown one.

"No use, Posie," he muttered. "I've lost my job for good this time."

Meanwhile the manager had gone from the house as though intent upon leaving at once. On the porch he hesitated, consulted his watch, paced nervously up and down for a moment or two, then re-entered the house.

Rose's sisters, Mrs. Butterworth and Jim were gathered in the hall, conversing angrily.

The manager hesitated again, then visibly resumed his pompous demeanor and approached Mrs. Butterworth.

"I would be very much obliged if you would give me something to eat before I start back," he said.

"And I," said Mrs. Butterworth stiffly and with dignity, "have nothing for you nor the likes of you. In other words, I like your room better than your company!"

Rose, coming downstairs, heard the last words and giggled nervously. At the sound, the already irate manager flushed a fiery red and strode again from the house.

Jim followed him out, hands in pocket, grin-

ning enjoyably. He watched his former "boss" with a maddening complacency.

The latter started down the porch, then turned back.

"Look here!" he blurted. "Some one's got to get this truck back to headquarters. Are you going to do it?"

"Guess again," rejoined Jim, his grin broadening. "As far as I'm concerned, I've driven the last truck for you and the rotten concern you represent. Now," his grin faded and he took a threatening step forward, "my advice to you is, get out, and stay out!"

At these words the manager retreated to his machine with more haste than dignity. With the motor started and his foot on the brake he turned and pointed a finger at Jim.

"Consider yourself fired," he cried.

"You can't fire me," said Jim, his grin returning, "considering that I fired myself almost ten minutes ago. Good-bye, old man, and good luck to you." He waved genially as the car leaped ahead beneath the hand of the irate manager.

He felt a touch on his arm and turned to look into Rose's sparkling eyes.

"You were splendid!" she cried.

"Thanks!" he said, and thought that Joe was a "lucky guy" to have as pretty and enthusiastic a champion as this lovely girl. "Just

the same," the grin faded and gloom overspread his good-natured face, "nothing can alter the fact that Joe and I have lost pretty good jobs. If we could only lay hands on that stolen stuff—"

"Suppose I told you that there was even a chance of that?" Rose was breathless, her eyes bright.

The puzzled look in Jim's face changed to a swift eagerness.

"You've got to explain that!" he said tensely. "What do you mean?"

Rose told him swiftly and with an excitement that matched his own about the red car and the suspicious actions of the men who owned it. How they had accidentally come upon two of the men in the woods back of the house, of their queer disappearance on that same day, of Margy's impression that the earth had opened and swallowed them up—

"A cave, I bet you," interjected Jim. "But go on—this interests me!"

"A red car flashed past us as you stumbled out on the road—"

"By Jove," cried Jim, "it was a red car that held us up!" He turned to Rose, caught her arm in a grip that hurt. "Can you take me to that spot in the woods where your sister thought she saw these fellows disappear?" As

Rose nodded assent he went on: "Will you go with me now?"

For answer, Rose ran down the steps, the young fellow in eager pursuit.

Meanwhile Helen went up to Joe's room to see what she could do for the lad. She found him with his face turned to the wall. He was sound asleep.

"Poor boy!" she whispered, pulling the covers up a little higher about him. "A good sleep will make him feel like new. He may have his chicken dinner at Peach Farm after all!" she added whimsically.

Helen closed the door gently and went downstairs to join Margy and Mrs. Butterworth on the porch. She wondered where Rose had gone, but supposed she would be back in a few moments.

Before reaching the lower hall, the sound of voices on the porch came to her ears. There was an incredulous, joyful cry from Mrs. Butterworth.

"My niece! Kit, my poor baby!"

Helen ran to the door in time to see Mrs. Butterworth rush down the steps of the porch toward a shabby, weary little figure that haltingly approached the house, carrying a heavy suitcase in her hand.

As Mrs. Butterworth reached her, the girl

dropped her bag, raised a white, tear-stained face.

"Auntie—Auntie—you won't want me! Nobody wants me—anywhere!" A frantic, terrible cry of utter despair. "I lost my job, Auntie! I'm in disgrace! I haven't even the courage to—to kill myself!" The last words rose to a hysterical shriek and ended in jagged, heart-breaking sobs.

Margy and Helen clung to each other, quivering, shaken.

Mrs. Butterworth gathered the strange girl in her arms and carried her to the porch and set her down in the swing.

"There, there, my precious," she crooned. One gentle hand removed the girl's shabby hat, smoothed back her dark hair. "Cry it out, honey. You're safe. You're at home. You're with auntie."

"They say I'm a thief, Auntie. They say I took her pocketbook. I didn't—I didn't—I didn't!" The reiterated denial rose again to the point of hysteria.

Mrs. Butterworth, still holding the sobbing girl, half rose to her feet and looked beseechingly toward Helen and Margy.

Helen, in whose mind a vague suspicion had grown to sudden certainty, came forward quickly. She glanced at the suitcase. It was marked L.K.S. She dropped to her knees be-

side the swing, took the girl's cold hand in her warm one.

"Is your name Laura Small?" she asked with eager swiftness.

The girl looked startled.

"Yes," she said.

"Then listen, Laura Small," Helen's voice held the ring of joyful reassurance. "My sisters and I tried to find you two weeks ago. We found the purse they were foolish enough to think you took at Lossar-Martin's and we took it to the store and returned it to the head of the department."

The girl lifted her head; the hand that Helen held in hers grew tense and still; for a moment she was silent; then she spoke in a strained, hoarse voice.

"You found the purse!" she reiterated, incredulous hope dawning in her haggard young face. "Where? Oh, where?"

"In a new trunk. That woman—that Mrs. Platt-Brush herself—must have dropped it there without knowing—"

The girl sat up, pushed the damp hair back from her face with trembling hands.

"Then at the store they know—that I am not—what they thought—"

"Not only that, my dear," said Helen gently. "But they are so sorry for misjudging you, the head of the trunk department said,

that they are eager to give you your old position back again if you want it—"

"If I want it!" The girl sprang to her feet, her face transfigured, upturned toward the brightening sky. "If I want it!" she repeated, in a husky whisper, and swayed and would have fallen had not Mrs. Butterworth caught her in her ready, hungry arms.

CHAPTER XXV

A Hidden Cave

It was a considerable time before any of those on the porch recovered their composure.

At last, when Helen and Margy had been thanked over and over again and fairly smothered with gratitude, the two girls turned away, thinking to leave aunt and niece alone with their recovered happiness.

As they turned to enter the house something in the orchard arrested Margy's gaze. A small form had scuttled from the shelter of one tree to another, as though in fear of pursuit. While Margy watched, puzzled, the process was repeated.

Excitedly she grasped Helen by the arm.

"That child!" she cried. "Do you see him?"

Helen stared. Impatiently, she drew a hand across her eyes as though clearing a mist from before them.

"It looks like the boy of the red auto," she said. With the next breath she added: "It is!" and ran swiftly down the steps and into

the orchard. Margy followed, thinking to herself:

"What next, I wonder!"

The child saw them coming. With a cry like some poor little frightened animal, he broke from cover and started to run. It was an easy matter to overtake him, for he was bruised and weak and half-starved.

Helen reached him first, put out a hand and touched his wasted shoulder. The child shrank pitifully from her touch. But Helen was on her knees beside him, drawing him to her gently, compassionately.

"Don't you see that I won't hurt you, little lad?" she said. "You poor little, half-starved thing! All we want is to help you."

But the pitiful atom had learned apparently to distrust all mankind. It was a long time before Margy and Helen between them could persuade him, still quivering and shaking, to go with them to the house.

Mrs. Butterworth met them at the steps and immediately took the little lad beneath her capable wing. He was led into the big sunny kitchen where Laura Small was already seated before a bowl of steaming broth and a glass of hot milk.

The hot food which he, too, was given and the cheery atmosphere of the kitchen did wonders for the little lad. His face lost some of its

pinched and haggard look and the terror faded from his eyes. He clung to Helen and Mrs. Butterworth with a pitiful reliance.

"Poor little chick," said the latter, in an undertone to Margy, her kindly eyes full of tears. "He was half starved to death. What was he doing in my orchard, do you suppose, and where does he come from?" she added curiously.

Margy drew her into the hall and told her that this was the little lad who had been with the men in the red automobile and of whom she and her sisters had already told her. She had barely finished the tale when Rose and Jim came in, looking crestfallen and dispirited enough.

Rose explained her errand with Jim in the woods. The latter was turning away when Margy called him back. When she told them of finding the little lad in the orchard, all their excitement and hope returned.

Rose wished to question the child immediately, but Margy warned her that they must be very careful if they hoped to get any information at all from the frightened lad.

"Gee, let me do it! I bet I'll get the little fellow to tell me everything he knows while you folks are thinking about it!"

They turned, startled, to find Joe on the stairs. His hair was rumpled, but he was fully dressed. His eyes blazed in his white face.

HELEN WAS DRAWING HIM TO HER GENTLY.

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Coming down quietly, it was evident he had overheard the entire conversation.

Rose ran to him, protesting that he should go back to bed.

"Nonsense," he said, almost roughly. "I'm all right. Where is this lad you were speaking about?"

The others, protesting, followed him into the kitchen. But Joe had a way with children. Within five minutes of his introduction to the little lad, the latter was sitting on the young fellow's knee, sobbing out in pitiful, broken snatches his dreadful story.

The name of the child was Teddy Japson, and he had been, for a long time, the virtual prisoner of the men of the red automobile.

"He says he's my uncle, that big one," said the lad. "But he ain't. I know he ain't, or he wouldn't beat me so. He's got a cave, too, in the woods." The child's voice sank and he looked shiveringly over his shoulder. "But don't let him get me! He's after me now. He'll kill me! He'll—"

"Say, old man, he hasn't a chance of getting you," said Joe, ruffling up the boy's hair in man-to-man fashion. "Don't you let that worry you for a second. And now, how about a look at that cave? Are you game to lead us to it? Or are you scared?"

The lad squared his small shoulders and slid off Joe's knee to the floor.

"I'm game!" he said, and started manfully toward the door.

"There's good stuff in that boy," said Mrs. Butterworth admiringly. "I've a mind to go along, just to see those ruffians don't lay hands on him again."

"Come on, Auntie—I'll go too!" Laura Small was beside the older woman, face flushed and eager. "I feel as though I could defy the world now!"

"Who's she?" asked Rose of Margy, as they all followed Teddy Japson and his escort toward the woods in the rear of the house. When Margy had explained about Laura Small, whose full name was Laura Kittie Small, Rose raised her hands in a gesture of bewilderment.

"What else?" she marveled. "I'm quite sure; yet, it must be all a dream!"

Teddy Japson led them through the woods with an assurance that could have been born only of long custom.

Up the mountain trail now so familiar to the girls he went, coming quickly to the hillock from whose shelter on a former occasion Margy had watched the boy and his two companions so mysteriously disappear.

In a moment this mystery was cleared up for them. And how simple was the explana-

tion, once they were shown it! It was a cave that had swallowed up the two men and the boy, so cleverly disguised by leaves and branches that the entrance to it had been invisible to the boys and girls when they had searched for it so short a time before.

Their small guide hesitated when he reached this spot, but a word from Joe caused him to square his shoulders again. He pulled aside the branches from in front of the cave and ducked within, Joe and Jim following closely on his heels. The girls came behind, hearts pounding. Mrs. Butterworth and her niece came after them, game to the end.

Joe waited for the girls to catch up with him.

"Keep close to us, Posie," he said in a low voice, charged with excitement. "I have a feeling we are about to discover something of considerable interest! Hold on to my coat tails—there's the girl!"

The cave smelled damp and musty and the sides were slimy and cold to the touch. The girls kept close together, shivering with excitement and a clammy sort of fear. It was as though they could at that moment expect to feel an icy hand upon them.

They came after what seemed to them an interminable journey in this undergone passage, to a spot where the cave widened out, thus forming a large square chamber.

"Here it is!" came Teddy's shrill little voice. "They hide things here!"

"All right, old man." Joe's voice was quivering with excitement and hope. "Now for a little light on the subject!"

A match flickered, throwing a weird illumination upon their white and startled faces. The first feeble flame did little to dispel the gloom.

Joe lighted another match and another. Jim followed his example, and still they could discover nothing in the dim shadows of the cave.

"We should have brought a torch," cried Joe. In exasperation he lunged forward, caught his toe on something, and fell heavily.

"A light," he cried, eagerly. "A light, Jim, old man! Quick!"

In the flare of the next match Joe was discovered lying full length on the floor of the cave, his arms about some bulky object.

"Joe, it's the chest!" Jim's voice shook with excitement. "And I bet all the rest of the stuff is here too!"

As the match flickered out Joe scrambled to his feet. His first words proved him master of the situation.

"The little lad here says his bandit friends visit this place at night—afraid to come here in the daytime, probably. Now my idea is this —let's inform the police, come with them to-

night, and help in the round-up of these rascals ourselves."

"Suits me fine!" agreed Jim, with relish. "And now let's get out of this place pronto!"

Shortly after nightfall on that same eventful day, the sheriff of Grangeville, three of his assistants, Joe Morris and Jim, lay in ambush near the secret mountain cave.

What these did not know was that, not a stone's throw away, also concealed in the dense underbrush, were three other participants in the man-hunt; namely, Helen, Margy and Rose Blythe!

"If they think we are going to miss all the fun, they never were more mistaken in their lives," the latter had observed, earlier that evening. "We'll show them that girls can be of use, sometimes!"

Just the same, there was something eerie and breath-catching in the heavy darkness of that silent wood. The girls could hear their own breathing, could feel the quick beating of their hearts.

Margy moved cautiously closer—a twig snapped under her foot.

"Sh!" Helen's fingers closed about her arm. "I hear some one!"

The heavy, though cautious, clumping of feet through underbrush—faint at first—coming

her woodland picture. She looked up now to see Laura Small coming toward them through the trees, leading Teddy Japson by the hand. The girl was carrying a handful of mail and looked as bright and happy as the summer morning itself.

"Some letters for you," she called to the girls. Dropping the mail into Rose's lap she flung herself on the grass and drew the little lad down beside her.

"Auntie thinks she will adopt Teddy."

The girls looked up eagerly.

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Helen. "But suppose that awful uncle of his claims him?"

"We feel sure the man is no relation to Teddy," Laura returned contentedly, and for the first time the girls saw a resemblance to Mrs. Butterworth. "And if he is, he can't have him. A villain like that!"

"Girls!" Rose had opened a letter from Annabelle Black. Now she looked up from it eagerly. "Annabelle says those rumors concerning Lossar-Martin's are all false. They were started by friends of Herbert Shomberg."

"That old floorwalker that was discharged for stealing plumes!" Margy nodded sagely. "I thought it was something like that."

"Lossar-Martin's! To think my old job is waiting for me," said Laura Small dreamily.

"I must be going back to the city in a few days."

Rose looked up from her letter. "Why not go with us?" she suggested.

Laura nodded happily. "I'd love to," she said.

Helen went back to her letter from Hugh.

"All the boys are coming up over next week-end," she announced after a minute, her eyes bright. "Probably we can all go home together."

Margy was chuckling over a letter from Miss Pepper. The old lady had discovered in some way her nephew's intention of motoring out to Peach Farm for the purpose of calling on her social secretary.

"When I told him," wrote Miss Pepper, "that, in case he carried out such intention, should not only disinherit him but throw in a horse-whipping for good measure, he changed his mind. Impudent cub!"

"The old darling," thought Margy. "If I had her here, I'd hug her, though she discharged me for it the next minute. Now, with Rex Pepper off my mind, perhaps I can enjoy my vacation!"

Teddy Japson had snuggled up to Helen, admiring her picture. "There comes Joe Mor-

ris," he said suddenly and shyly, pointing down the road.

The girls looked up and saw Joe coming. From that first glance they knew he had brought them good news.

"Don't say a word till I've spilled it," he begged, flinging himself down on the grass among them. "I've got to get it off my chest, or I'll burst. First of all, all the stuff stolen from the truck was found in the cave last night. Wait!" as Rose made as if to interrupt. "That isn't all of it! I telegraphed the company, telling them everything, and got a telegram back saying that the manager had been fired and yours truly was probably slated for his place!"

"Joe, it's a fairy tale—"

"Wait! You don't know the half of it yet!"

Joe looked about at the eager faces. His eyes twinkled.

"You are, damsels, famous. You are probably blissfully unaware of it, but the crook you captured last night was the leader of this gang of road bandits and a woman—"

"A woman!" Rose sprang to her feet, eyes gleaming. "Then I *was* right, after all!"

"More than that," Joe went on imperturbably. "This woman is a dangerous criminal, an escaped convict, and there is a reward for her capture; a reward of five hundred dollars."

Margy sprang excitedly to her feet.

"Are you trying to tell us, Joe Morris, that we get this reward?"

Joe grinned cheerfully. "Nothing but!" he told them.

"Five hundred dollars!"

"What do you know about that!"

"It certainly is a large reward," observed Helen.

"I'll say it is!" exclaimed Margy. "Five hundred dollars! Gracious, what I couldn't do with that right now!"

"My, but a fellow could get a whole lot of ice-cream cones with so much money," murmured Teddy.

"Ice-cream cones!" burst out Laura. "Oh, Teddy!"

"You shall have as many ice-cream cones as you want when we go to the village," said Helen, who also had heard what the little boy said.

Rose dramatically put a hand to her brow.

"This is too much!" she cried. "Catch me, ere I faint!"

"Don't you dare!" Joe jumped to his feet and caught her firmly by the wrist. "Not till after dinner anyway. If my ears do not mislead me, I hear the first faint tinkle of the dinner bell."

"Chicken, too!" laughed Rose. "Come on,

Margy. Come on, Helen. My, what a wonderful world it is!"

"It surely is!" said Margy as they ran toward the house.

"And now," said Helen, watching Laura and Teddy Japson as they scurried together, laughing, across the field, "the best part of our vacation has just begun!"

The excited young folks piled into the house one after another, there to acquaint the astonished Mrs. Butterworth with the news Joe had brought.

"Well, isn't that too good for anything!" she ejaculated.

All went into the dining room, and now, while the Blythe girls and their friends are eating the chicken dinner and having "the best time ever" over the numerous good things provided, we will, for the time being, say farewell.

THE END

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